LEARNING FROM OXFAM'S PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE IN UKRAINE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ACRONYMS

ACE	Advocacy, campaigns and engagement
BDM	Business development manager
CAPAS	Capacity and partnership assessment system
CBO	Community-based organization
CSO	Civil society organization
DD	Due diligence
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
FGD	Focus group discussion
GAU	Gay Alliance of Ukraine
HNRP	Humanitarian needs and response plan
IDP	Internally displaced person
ICR	Indirect cost recovery
INGO	International non-governmental organization
INSO	International NGO Security Organization
ISI	Institutional Strengthening Initiative
KII	Key informant interview
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual
LHL	Local humanitarian leadership
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OCHA	Office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs
Oxfam GB	Oxfam Great Britain
PHK	Peaceful Heaven of Kharkiv
PMU	Program management unit
SMT	Senior management team
TTA	The Tenth of April
UHF	Ukraine Humanitarian Fund
VoR	Voice of Romni
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WCU	Women's Consortium of Ukraine
WHLF	Women's humanitarian leadership fund
WLO	Women-led organization
WRO	Women's rights organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The full-scale invasion in Ukraine has led to grave humanitarian consequences with 5.7 million[1] people taking refuge outside of Ukraine, 2.8 million[2] people internally displaced, and in 2025, an estimated 12.7 million in need of humanitarian assistance and services (OCHA, 2025). Local actors including civil society organisations, volunteer groups and local authorities have led much of the humanitarian response, demonstrating speed, flexibility and courage in an increasingly protracted and complex crisis. It is within this context that Oxfam made the decision to engage in the humanitarian response through a partnership-centred response designed to support and strengthen local humanitarian leadersship (LHL).

Oxfam's response in Ukraine was designed from the beginning with learning as a key pillar. This review contributes to that process by focusing on four objectives:

1. To assess Oxfam's internal structures, processes and culture as enablers or barriers to the application of its partnership and feminist principles.
2. To examine Oxfam's financial and non-financial support and its effects, positive and negative, on advancing local humanitarian leadership.
3. To review program quality, including scale, timeliness, effectiveness, relevance and inclusivity.
4. To analyse Oxfam's partnership approach and its grounding in feminist principles.

Data was collected between September and October 2025 and combined qualitative and quantitative methods:

- 42 key informant interviews (KIIs) with Oxfam staff, partners, external stakeholders and donors/funders – conducted both remotely and in Ukraine, in English and Ukrainian.
- 11 focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 98 program participants across five locations (Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Odesa) and including women, men, individuals living in collective sites, LGBTQIA+ individuals and members of the Roma community.
- 33 survey respondents from Oxfam and organisations partnering with Oxfam.

A partnership-centred response

With no prior presence in the region, Oxfam launched a four-country humanitarian response covering Ukraine, Poland, Romania and Moldova focused on supporting local leadership through a partnership-centred response and driven by Oxfam's commitment to LHL and feminist principles. Oxfam's partnership-centred response in Ukraine illustrates a departure from how humanitarian programming has traditionally been designed and delivered. In Ukraine, the response supported by Oxfam was defined as partnership-centred because local partners designed the program from inception, determining priorities, methodologies, budgets and implementation strategies based on their intimate knowledge of community needs and contexts. Oxfam chose to finance this response entirely through pooled humanitarian appeal funds (including the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)) alongside its own public fundraising which in itself facilitated the flexibility needed to support the partnership-centred response.

As the regional context evolved, Oxfam **phased out from Romania and Moldova by mid-2023 and completed its exit from Poland in October 2024,** with subsequent efforts focused exclusively on Ukraine. This prompted an internal restructuring, as Oxfam transitioned from a regional management model to a single-country structure merging into a streamlined configuration. This transition was part of a planned, time-bound response, with Oxfam aiming to fully exit Ukraine by August 2026. From early 2024, this phase of the partnership-centred response prioritises partner organisations' sustainability,

responsible transition planning, and investment in local leadership. This phase sees the response moving away from partnership-centred program delivery to supporting partners' resilience with a focus on **seven strategic partner organisations in Ukraine**[3] **and supporting WROs through a specific Women Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF).**[4] As part of this phase, the Institutional Strengthening Initiative (ISI) was introduced in early 2025 to support strategic partners' organisational development.

Learning 1: the success and difficulties of adapting internal processes

What characterised Oxfam's approach to adapting internal processes was a relational approach with partners: how Oxfam staff interacted and engaged with partners as opposed to what tools they used. Instead of lowering standards, Oxfam brought agility within existing systems and processes, applying them more flexibly rather than replacing them. Oxfam was intentional in its approach to systems and processes asking itself what was necessary and required at each step of the response.

Yet, Oxfam's systems and processes (e.g., financial management, reporting) were perceived by Oxfam staff (38% of survey respondent) and some partners[5] as not adapted enough to a partnership-centric response. This is despite Oxfam investing time and effort in tailoring due diligence approaches, partnership agreement and finance management as well as reporting requirements. In contrast, in spite of ranking systems and processes as a third highest challenge in the survey, partners stated they perceived most systems and processes as flexible and agile enabling their work rather than being a barrier. They reported these systems and processes to be complex but responsive to their needs and circumstances.

Legacy systems within Oxfam continue to cause a mismatch with LHL. More specifically, challenges remain with regards to Oxfam's internal audit process which is not set up for a partnership-centred response and therefore not fit for purpose. Process comfort and risk aversion within Oxfam also translated into long approval chains with hesitation to test bold approaches and at times self-censorship from Oxfam staff. While flexibility was at the heart of the partnership-centred response, flexibility proved to be hard to learn for both Oxfam and partners and required learning flexibility as both a skillset and a mindset. Flexibility is also fragile and requires an overall system and organisational culture adaptation to continue working.

The Ukraine response team focused on **balancing flexibility with accountability**, consciously tailoring compliance mechanisms and accepting a higher level of perceived risk to enable rapid delivery and genuine partner leadership. On paper, a partnership-centred response can appear riskier particularly in terms of compliance and fiduciary oversight. In a few instances, compliance risks could have materialised if the response had been under greater institutional donor scrutiny but this was primarily due to an imperfect paper trail rather than any misuse of funds or unethical behaviour. In practice, no significant financial or operational risks materialised. The perception of heightened risk was further challenged by Oxfam's internal audit of the Ukraine response, which awarded a **medium grade** confirming overall compliance and effective internal controls. This outcome illustrates that, despite the perception of higher risk, a partnership-centred response can meet organisational standards when supported by adaptive oversight. More broadly, this aligns with wider sectoral evidence showing that **perceptions of risk** especially among donors and INGOs tend to **overstate fiduciary and reputational risks** while **underestimating the capacity of local actors to mitigate other types of risk**, such as those related to access, contextual understanding, or responsiveness. The Ukraine experience demonstrated that contextualising and tailoring systems and processes does not inherently increase risk. It also underscored the need to redefine how institutional risk is understood and managed within a partnership-centred model.

Learning 2: Team structures and cultures

Oxfam intentionally rethought its team structure to support a new phase of response from 2024 putting LHL and partnerships at the heart of Oxfam's country structure. This marked a deliberate move from supporting partners' program delivery to positioning the entire team as a service to partners. Roles across the response were repositioned to directly support partners' systems, leadership, and organisational sustainability. The 2024 restructure also introduced a deeper cultural transformation, embedding a relationship-based model of collaboration across the team. Recruitment under the new structure placed equal emphasis on soft skills, interpersonal communication, and alignment with LHL values, alongside technical expertise. The Partnership Coordinator role brought structure, coherence, and a more strategic, solution-oriented way of working across the team. Staff described this function as acting like a partnership union representative, ensuring that partners' perspectives and needs are embedded in internal decision-making processes.

What enabled a genuine partnership-centred model was not new processes, tools or templates, but a shift in mindset: from control to collaboration, from compliance to conversation. What mattered was not the **what** of procedures, but the **how** of engagement: attitude, behaviour, and relational practice. Partners consistently described Oxfam as "the most comfortable and supportive partner"(KII partner). A defining feature of Oxfam's technical approach was its propositional but non-directive character. Staff learned to offer options and ideas without imposing them, a subtle but significant shift in practice that reflected genuine respect for partners' autonomy. Overall, the relational quality and the way staff engaged with partners proved more influential in building equitable partnerships than any formal procedural innovation.

Identifying the right level of capacity to keep within Oxfam remains a challenge. While partners did not highlight this as a challenge, Oxfam staff felt overstretched unable to provide their desired level of tailored accompaniment to partners. This was partly due to Oxfam staff delivering support to partners while learning by doing. Oxfam also found it challenging to clarify its offering to partners across all functions. This included in particular technical program support and operations (e.g., HR, security, logistics).

Learning 3: the institutional strengthening initiatives

The **Institutional Strengthening Initiative (ISI)** was established as a central pillar of Oxfam's **responsible phase-out strategy in Ukraine,** designed to move beyond short-term project funding and instead invest in **the sustainability and leadership** of a small group of long-standing partners. Each partner received an **€80,000 flexible grant** dedicated to institutional development, accompanied by intensive technical accompaniment. Oxfam intentionally adopted a trust-based and partner-driven model where partners defined what institutional strengthening meant for their organisations, identified their own priorities, and developed bespoke action plans. For many partners, the ISI represented a new kind of relationship: one that trusted them to set their own direction and make strategic decisions for their growth. Partners reported a real sense of confidence and felt the ISI was both empowering and transformative. Action plans were treated as living documents, adapted when needed.

While the financial support from the ISI gave partners the ability to hire dedicated staff, the non-financial support from the ISI was repeatedly highlighted as its strength. This non-financial support took the form of tailored and relationship-based accompaniment including holding bilateral discussions, playing a critical friend role through revising funding proposals, offering mentoring and coaching rather than predefined training. Quarterly check-ins play a key role in maintaining this dynamic. Rather than compliance exercises, these are framed as joint reflection sessions, focused on

learning and forward planning. With about six months of full implementation at the time of this review, the ISI had already contributed to partners' diversification of funding and partnerships.

The non-financial support developed through the ISI could have been implemented more systematically as a core part of the partnership-centred response from the onset of the response. The ISI took a long time to be established and is now facing some limitations in terms of the limited time left before Oxfam's exit. In 2022, in the height of the humanitarian response more ad hoc support could have been provided where perceived to be essential to program delivery, evolving over time towards more structured self-defined institutional strengthening plans and eventually more in-depth assessments of capacity gaps. Indeed, while partner organisations should always define their own priorities, a more joint approach to assessing capacity gaps and institutional strengthening needs could further inform institutional strengthening plans.

Learning 4: Keeping program outcome and impact at the core of partnership-centred approaches

The partnership-centred response led to better outcomes for people affected by the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. It was principled, accountable, relevant, able to adapt to changing needs, in a timely manner; the partnership-centred response reached hard-to-reach populations and was inclusive of more marginalised population groups. It supported interventions nobody else was willing to fund and filled in gaps in the wider humanitarian response. This was significantly due to partners' own capacity, relationships with communities, proximity to communities and ability to understand the context.

However, Oxfam's intentional and thoughtful approach to the partnership-centred response skipped a bit on program outcome and impact. The learning review found there was limited visibility around program outcomes and impact. Oxfam struggled at times to transfer its technical know-how and contribute to improving program quality. The fear of imposing Oxfam's ways of working and standards on program delivery meant Oxfam missed an opportunity to fully act in complementarity with partners and lend its added value where possible. Oxfam could have worked more intentionally with partners to define what program quality mean for the partnership-centred response, jointly defining an approach rather than imposing externally set standards and approaches. This could have been supported by a joint approach to monitoring program outcomes and impact which was lacking in the partnership-centred response. The role of Oxfam in a partnership-centred response should be based on a clear understanding and definition of what Oxfam's complementarity is, including with regards to achieving outcomes and impact for people affected by crises.

The partnership-centred response was also perceived by Oxfam staff as fragmented and lacking in scale. Oxfam could have done more to work across partners to ensure more coherence and more strategic approach to program design while still putting partners in the lead. Oxfam could have worked as a facilitator to support more joined up approaches within and across sectors. The challenge of scale may have been the result of the protection focus response where protection programs tend to be implemented at lower scale due to their nature. The focus on scale as critical outcome also reflects a sector-wide tendency and bias where scale tends to be valued over other indicators of success such as inclusion, quality, impact. While in Ukraine other actors were responding at scale where necessary, the partnership-centred response focused on a critical failure from others: to deliver assistance and services to highly vulnerable, marginalised and hard-to-reach populations. This was more critical to complement gaps in the wider humanitarian response than focusing on scale. More generally, the humanitarian sector tends to fail to deliver quality, impactful and inclusive responses highlighting the benefit of partnership-centred responses that intentional partner with organisations run by and for marginalised population groups.

Learning 5: Addressing power considerations helped Implementing partnership and feminist principles

The partnership-centred response aimed to implement LHL, partnership and feminist principles and commitments. The learning review found that these were not only implemented but were essential to one another. LHL, partnership principles and commitments are enhanced by the implementation of feminist principles and vice versa. This led to high quality partnerships where 100% of partner organisations rated partnering with Oxfam as either good or excellent in the learning review survey.

Careful considerations of power, power shifting and power sharing were at the core of implementing these principles. Oxfam staff demonstrated a high awareness of their own positionality and power, an essential element to intentionally shifting power in partnerships. There was also a recognition that power between Oxfam and partners can never be fully equal because of the way financial resources flow.

The internal implementation of feminist principles as part of the management culture (in particular in offering an environment where it was safe to fail) allowed Oxfam staff to try innovative ways of working with partners. While staff felt supported to implement these principles, feminist principles are inherently hard to translate in practice. They are inherently reliant on internal self-reflection, a mindset that takes time to adopt.

There must also be a recognition that LHL and feminist principles can come in tension with certain roles and functions. Flexibility was core to translating these principles in practice. Roles and functions that rely for their success on playing by the book, implementing strict standards and rules have a greater challenge in resolving inherent tensions between the culture of their role and flexibility. These tensions must be recognised and staff with these roles supported.

Learning 6: Cross-cutting enablers of the partnership-centred response

Leadership's commitment to LHL was a critical cross-cutting enabler of the partnership-centred response. At different levels of the Oxfam confederation, through affiliates to the Ukraine response leadership, there was a clear alignment and agreement on risk appetite and support to try new ways of partnering and working. This allowed Oxfam staff to adapt ways of working around internal processes. Even where internal processes were not fit for purpose as with Oxfam's internal audit, the leadership's commitment to LHL mitigated the findings of the internal audit recognising where the audit process was a mismatch with Oxfam's LHL commitments. The Ukraine response leadership adopted an adaptive and learning management approach and was described as intentional – taking time to reflect not only on what the organisation does but how it does it. This provided the reflective space necessary for staff to learn new ways of working and partnering. It fostered the right skillset and mindset to adopt the flexibility needed to implement a partnership-centred response aligned with LHL and partnership principles.

Leadership as an enabler was further supporting by a **strong financial base**. The partnership-centred response in Ukraine was facilitated by appeal funding (including from the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC)), which tend to be highly flexible. The financial stability and flexibility allowed multiple rounds of restructuring of Oxfam's team in a short period. It also enabled flexible approaches to financial management, due diligence and reporting. Flexibility within its budget and across budget lines directly translated in the ability for Oxfam to lend that flexibility to partners. Partners used this ability to shift budgets and therefore program focus according to changing needs and emerging crises. This ensured parter organisations could make the most of their own capacity to identifying shifting priorities and needs and intervene in a relevant and adaptive manner. This was further reflected in feedback from program participants who repeatedly confirm the relevance and adaptive nature of the response.

It is the interaction of Oxfam's leadership approach coupled with the financial flexibility of appeal funding that allowed the partnership-centred response to implement flexibility as a mindset and skillset. One enabler without the other would have made this outcome more challenging.

Learning 7: Remaining gaps for a partnership-centred approach

There were gaps in shared understanding and integration of risks sharing. While risk sharing became a frequent term in internal and external discussions, its meaning remained conceptually ambiguous. Although risk matrices were systematically developed as part of every project proposal, there was no structured mechanism to follow up on these risks as part of the partnership or to escalate them beyond the project level. The absence of established spaces for jointly discussing risks with partners limited opportunities to **reflect on how risks were distributed and managed between Oxfam and partner organisations**, and to promote a more deliberate, balanced approach to risk sharing. While Oxfam's approach to risk sharing was real and deliberate, it lacked formal documentation and structure which is what turns intentional practice into institutionalised risk management.

Oxfam has yet to define what success looks like for a partnership-centred response underpinned by LHL and feminist principles. This partly led to the lack of visibility of program quality in Oxfam's ways of partnering and a less intentional partnership-centred approach to program outcomes. While learning was at the core of the response to inform adaptation and innovation, a more structured and intentional approach to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) based on a clear definition of success was missing. This is a critical element to enable Oxfam to understand how well it is implementing its own commitments and principles, as well as an accountability to affected people. Better MEAL could also support Oxfam's advocacy on LHL and feminist principles and inform and incentivise the wider humanitarian sector's approach to localisation.

Oxfam struggled and has yet to find the right approach to sharing its technical program know-how. Oxfam was partly plagued by fear of imposing its own standards and ways of doing thing and thus shied away from a more joint responsibility around improving program quality through sharing technical know-how. Partners recognise Oxfam's experience and expertise and want to benefit from these through their partnerships with Oxfam. Oxfam needs to consider how it can act in complementarity, clearly defining its added value and role in the partnership in terms program quality and impact, while doing so in line with its LHL and feminist principles. These principles do not take away Oxfam's responsibility for the outcomes of the partnership-centred response but shapes how this should be done so as not to impose.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The partnership-centred response in Ukraine has been an experiment in fully embracing LHL and feminist principles. Oxfam and the wider sector must capitalise on this experience to learn how to advance their commitments to LHL. Ukraine is often categorised by its uniqueness. While this review acknowledges that the specific circumstances in the Ukraine response enabled Oxfam to take forward a partnership-centred response, these should not undermine the replicability of elements of this approach. There are learnings from the partnership-centred response in Ukraine that can and should be taken forward within Oxfam, local and national actors, by donors and by other humanitarian actors committed to supporting local humanitarian leadership. The below recommendations aim to identify how this can be done, focusing on replicating enablers and addressing remaining barriers.

Recommendations for Oxfam

- **Actively engage donors** in displaying what funding flexibility has enabled Oxfam and partners to achieve in Ukraine, and advocate for donors to adopt more flexible ways of supporting LHL.
- **Actively engage with other humanitarian actors** in Ukraine and beyond to advocate for improved partnership practices.
- **Continue to document in detail this experience** and embed it within wider Oxfam ways of working.
- **Work to revise Oxfam's internal audit practices** to make them more fit for purpose in partnership-centred responses and in line with LHL and feminist principles.
- **Explore the possibility of extending multi-year funding to partners** in partnership-centred response, challenging remaining barriers as well as through dialogue with donors on shared risk thresholds.
- **Establish structured yet "good enough" spaces for open discussion on risks with partner organisations**, recognising that partners are independent actors with the right to define and act on their own risk appetite.
- **Reflect further on the response and team structure,** and document what an ideal organigram would look like - particularly the capacities required to support institutional strengthening through both financial and non-financial support, including the technical program advisory expertise needed.
- **Consider how the ISI approach could have been integrated earlier** alongside program delivery.
- **Document the management approach and style of the partnership-centred response** as a key learning and enabler.
- **Rebuild visibility on program quality and outcomes within a partnership-centred model.**
- **Reflect on Oxfam's positionality in a partnership-centred response - not as a donor but based on a principle of complementarity and added value** - considering how Oxfam aims to lend its expertise and knowledge, grounded in LHL and feminist ways of working, to be an active contributor within the partnership.
- **Address the fragmentation of a response where individual partners design programs.**
- **Define what success looks like according to LHL and feminist principles and integrate this within a structured MEAL approach.**
- **Conduct a post-exit evaluation or learning review** focused on documenting the impact of the ISI on partners' organisations sustainability and their institutional strengthening plans. An appropriate timeline could be to conduct such an exercise in Summer 2027.

Recommendations for organisations that partnered with Oxfam

- **Share your experience** with other local and national actors in particular through the Alliance of Ukrainian CSOs to demonstrate how partnerships can work differently and better serve local and national actors.
- **Reflect on power, positionality and develop internal practices for how you engage with international partners**, ensuring you exercise leadership, co-design, influence including throug**h advocating with international organisations** you partner with to learn, adapt and adopt the positive practices you experienced with Oxfam.
- **Reflect critically** on your journey and role in the partnership with Oxfam, including where opportunities **may have been missed to strengthen impact for the population you aim to support.**
- **Collaborate with other** local and national actors in Ukrain**e to address increasing competition within the sector – displaying, through practice, how** collective action and cooperation can strengthen outcomes for affected populations.
- **Influence coordination and decision-making systems** including through advocating for operational systems that use local languages, take into account local realities, reduce barriers to participation.

Recommendations for Donors

- **Learn from Oxfam's experience in Ukraine,** particularly how it demonstrated the low-risk outcome of contextualised and relevant due diligence and compliance processes, and the critical impact of partners' leadership on response relevance and inclusive humanitarian outcomes.
- **Consider key funding enablers of the partnership-centred response** in Ukraine, in particular the ability of Oxfam to approve changes in partners' budget and interventions within broad parameters without prior approval from donors. This was a critical enabler of a response that was more relevant, adaptive to changing needs and responsive to new emergencies.
- **Review requirements to incentivise good quality and equitable partnerships,** including by rethinking value for money through more qualitative indicators in MEAL framework, such as trust and inclusion.
- **Dedicate funding to institutional strengthening, including** by funding intermediaries' staff capacities to ensure the provision of non-financial support and by enabling and making compulsory the sharing of ICR.
- **Require partners' co-leadership in proposal design and allocate sufficient budget to resource partner leadership roles meaningfully, including within coordination spaces.**
- **Reconsider how scale is used as the primary measure of program quality.**
- Recommendations for humanitarian actors wanting to adopt partnership-centred response
- **Consider how to replicate the enablers of the partnership-centred response** within your organisations,
- **Ensure your approach to institutional strengthening** integrates targeted and tailored non-financial support and partnership-centred institutional strengthening plans.
- Recommendations for humanitarian system reset
- **Build from the experience of the partnership-centred response in Ukraine to reimagine different roles for international actors** based on the principles of complementarity and stepping back.
- **Ensure that where partnerships are formed they do not only reward the largest national and local actors but considers intentionally and carefully the need to support a diverse set of actors** to support an inclusive and complementary ecosystem of response at national and local levels.
- **Consider more radical approaches to locally relevant humanitarian coordination.**
- **Ensure that current hyper-prioritisation does not lead to the exclusion of marginalised population groups and the defunding of organisations representing them** including WROs, organisations of people with disability, LGBTQIA+ organisations.

Recommendations for humanitarian actors wanting to adopt partnership-centred response

- **Consider how to replicate the enablers of the partnership-centred response** within your organisations.
- **Ensure your approach to institutional strengthening** integrates targeted and tailored non-financial support and partnership-centred institutional strengthening plans.

Recommendations for humanitarian system reset

- **Build from the experience of the partnership-centred response in Ukraine to reimagine different roles for international actors** based on the principles of complementarity and stepping back.
- **Ensure that where partnerships are formed they do not only reward the largest national and local actors but considers intentionally and carefully the need to support a diverse set of actors** to support an inclusive and complementary ecosystem of response at national and local levels.
- **Consider more radical approaches to locally relevant humanitarian coordination.**
- **Ensure that current hyper-prioritisation does not lead to the exclusion of marginalised population groups and the defunding of organisations representing them** including WROs, organisations of people with disability, LGBTQIA+ organisations.

1. INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

The full-scale invasion in Ukraine has led to 5.7 million[6] people taking refuge outside of Ukraine and 2.8 million[7] people displacing internally. In 2025, OCHA estimates 12.7 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and services of which 9.9 million are non-displaced war-affected people (OCHA, 2025). Local actors including civil society organizations (CSOs), volunteer groups and local authorities have led much of the humanitarian response, demonstrating speed, flexibility and courage in an increasingly protracted and complex crisis.

As a signatory to the Grand Bargain (IASC, n.d.), the Charter for Change (n.d.), and the Pledge for Change (n.d.), Oxfam is committed to transforming the humanitarian system by shifting power and resources to local and national actors. In line with these global commitments, Oxfam's approach in Ukraine was designed to strengthen local humanitarian leadership (LHL) and promote equitable, partnership-centered responses that prioritize the rights, needs and voices of those most affected by the conflict.

1.1 OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE LEARNING REVIEW

Oxfam commissioned this learning review on the partnership-centered response in Ukraine to document and consolidate lessons from Oxfam's implementation of its LHL, feminist and partnership approaches. It aims to identify achievements, challenges and organizational shifts that have influenced Oxfam's ways of working since 2024. The learning review focuses on the second phase of the partnership-centered response (from early 2024) which is defined by a new strategy, a focus on institutional strengthening and collaboration with seven strategic partners. A first learning review focused on the first phase of the partnership-centered response (early 2022 to end 2023) (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam International, 2024).

Oxfam's response in Ukraine was designed from the beginning as a learning response; this review contributes to that process by focusing on four objectives (see Annex 1 for the full list of review questions):

1. To assess Oxfam's internal structures, processes and culture as enablers or barriers to the application of its partnership and feminist principles.
2. To examine Oxfam's financial and non-financial support and its effects, positive and negative, on advancing local humanitarian leadership.
3. To review program quality, including scale, timeliness, effectiveness, relevance and inclusivity.
4. To analyze Oxfam's partnership approach and its grounding in feminist principles.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The learning review was conducted through a participatory and inclusive approach, guided by feminist principles of co-creation, mutual accountability and power sharing. The approach centered on:

• Inclusive co-design of methods and key questions with partners[8] and Oxfam.
• Participatory analysis through joint interpretation of findings and multiple validation workshops with partners and Oxfam.
• Respectful, multilingual engagement with Ukrainian stakeholders and program participants.
• Power-aware facilitation of discussions and reflection sessions.
• Integration of diverse perspectives, particularly from marginalized groups.
• Ethical use of findings, ensuring transparency, ownership and utility for partners.

A Steering Group composed of representatives from Oxfam Ukraine, Oxfam International, organizations partnering with Oxfam and other Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian external stakeholders guided the process and provided regular feedback on design, data collection and analysis.

The inception phase was intentionally participatory and included a survey of Oxfam staff (Ukraine response and confederation-wide) and partner organizations to refine the methodology and collect preliminary data on the learning questions. The survey responses were jointly analyzed by the review team and a representative from one organization partnering with Oxfam, ensuring shared interpretation and ownership of emerging insights. The survey also allowed the learning review to test how variables may affect responses. The learning review found that there was no impact on experience and responses of a partner organization's size, budget, age of organization, number of donors and partners or the size of Oxfam's contributions to their organization.

Data collection was conducted between September and October 2025 and combined qualitative and quantitative methods:

• 42 key informant interviews (KIIs) with Oxfam staff, partners, external stakeholders and donors/funders (see Figure 1) – conducted both remotely and in Ukraine, and both in English and Ukrainian.
• 11 focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 98 program participants across five locations (Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Odesa) and including women, men, individuals living in collective sites, LGBTQIA+ individuals and members of the Roma community.
• 33 survey respondents from Oxfam and organizations partnering with Oxfam (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF KII BY TYPE OF RESPONDENTS

Oxfam Ukraine response, current & former [21]
Partner organisations [5]
External actors outside Ukraine [10]
Oxfam wider confederation [4]
External actors in Ukraine [1]
Donors [1]
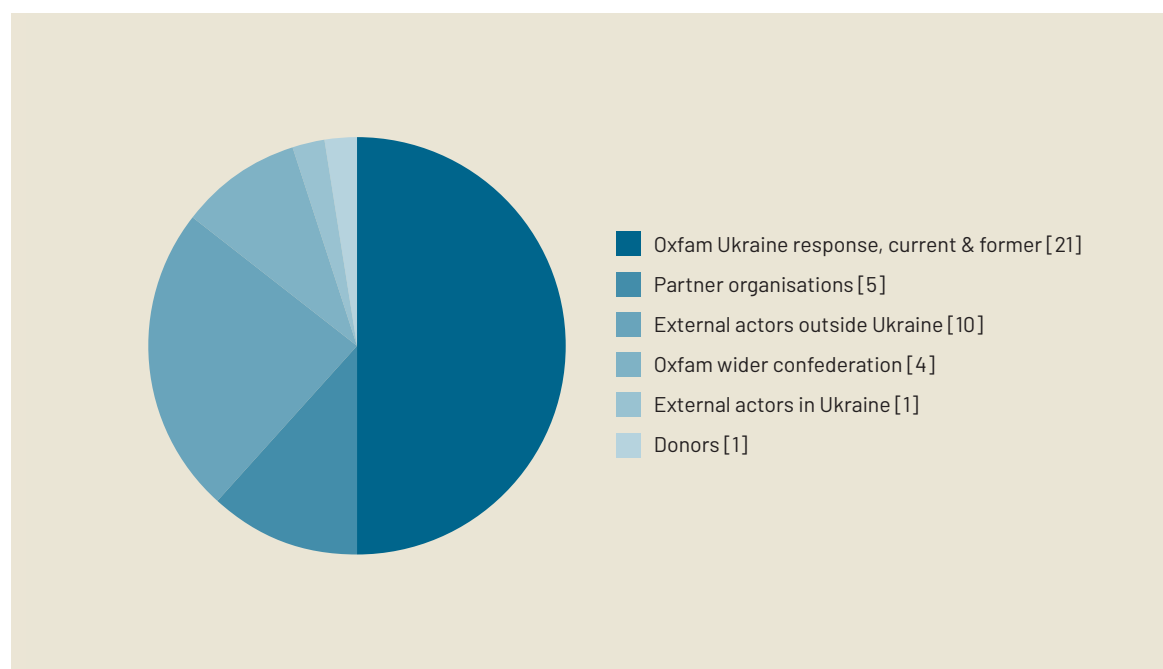
The validation phase was designed to strengthen the robustness and ownership of the analysis. It began with a Steering Committee validation workshop, followed by an **in-person workshop in Kyiv** (held in English and Ukrainian) with Oxfam Ukraine response staff, wider confederation members, and organizations partnering with Oxfam. The objective was to share preliminary findings, validate interpretations, fact-check key points, and refine the analysis collectively. In addition, findings were shared remotely with program participants to gather feedback and ensure their perspectives were reflected in the final analysis.

FIGURE 2: BREAKDOWN OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS
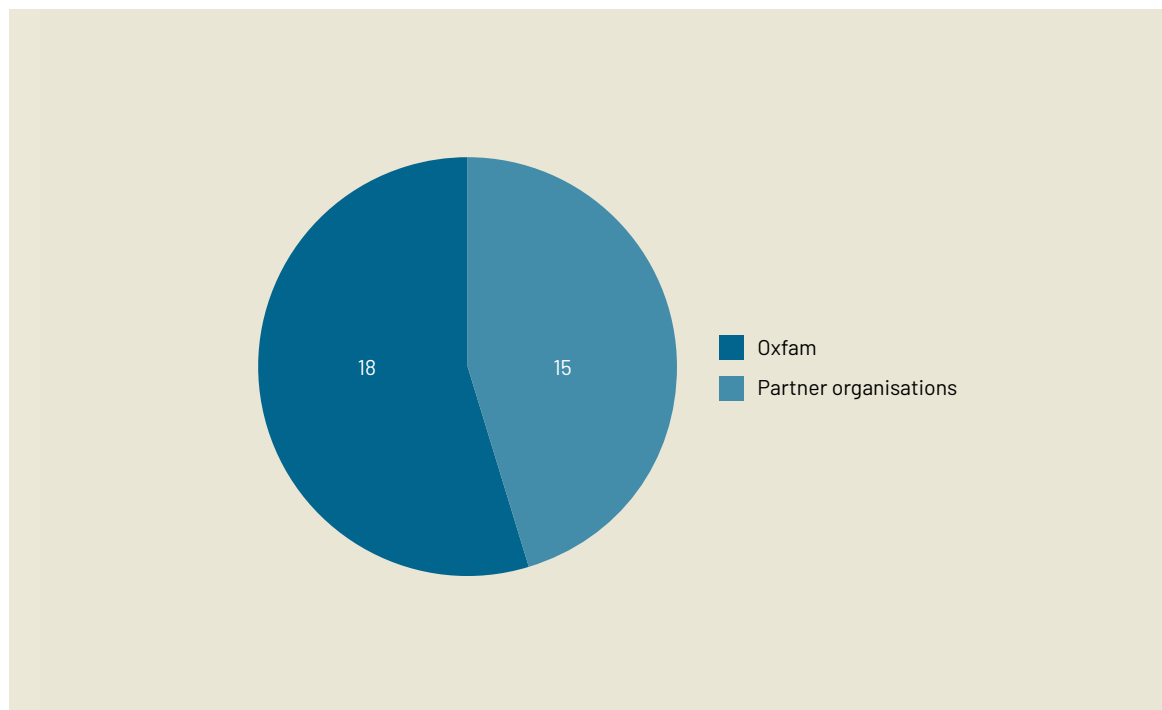
1.3 LIMITATIONS

The learning review faced several limitations that affected the depth and scope of the analysis:

- The distinction between the first and second phases of the response was at times difficult to establish, particularly given the turnover of staff and resulting challenges in tracing how approaches evolved over time.
- There was **limited data on program quality,** and at times **contradictory narratives** emerged in this area. There was also **limited documented evidence on MEAL systems** – particularly those measuring feminist or localization-focused approaches—and o**n risk management and risk-sharing practices,** which constrained the ability to assess these dimensions in depth.
- The tight timeline may have restricted broader participation in the survey and limited the number of FGDs, which were further impacted by security constraints and floods in Odesa.
- In some FGDs, the presence of partner representatives may have influenced participants' openness to share critical feedback. More generally, program participants felt grateful for the assistance they received and may have been reluctant to share negative feedback from fear of appearing ungrateful. Despite these constraints, the triangulation of diverse data sources and validation processes helped mitigate some of these limitations and ensured the credibility of the findings.

2. THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE IN UKRAINE AND ITS EVOLUTION: FROM PROGRAM DELIVERY TO INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING

2. THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE IN UKRAINE AND ITS EVOLUTION: FROM PROGRAM DELIVERY TO INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING

Following the escalation of the war in February 2022, Oxfam launched a four-country humanitarian response covering Ukraine, Poland, Romania and Moldova. With no prior presence in the region[9], Oxfam chose to implement a partnership-centered response model, recognizing the strength and leadership of local civil society that had already mobilized to meet the urgent needs of affected communities. While the response was primarily led by partner organizations, Oxfam also implemented a limited number of direct programs, including water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions in Ukraine to address urgent WASH needs in areas heavily affected by the conflict.

As the regional context evolved, Oxfam phased out from Romania and Moldova by mid-2023 and completed its exit from Poland in October 2024, with subsequent efforts focused exclusively on Ukraine. This transition was part of a planned, **time-bound response** with Oxfam aiming to fully exit Ukraine by August 2026. The current phase prioritizes partner sustainability, responsible transition planning, and investment in local leadership, building on lessons learned from earlier exits in neighboring countries.

In Ukraine, Oxfam partnered with different local and national organizations, delivering assistance in WASH, livelihoods, gender-based violence prevention and response, protection, and safe programming. These partnerships prioritized the inclusion of marginalized and at-risk groups, including women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and Roma communities, while strengthening partners' operational capacities and long-term resilience.

The Ukraine response has taken place in the context of an **exceptionally well-funded and well-capacitated humanitarian landscape.**[10] Oxfam chose to finance its operations entirely through pooled humanitarian appeal funds (including the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)) alongside its own public fundraising. This strategic choice, made possible by strong global solidarity with Ukraine, has afforded Oxfam greater flexibility and responsiveness than more conventional, earmarked funding streams.

The partnership-centered response in Ukraine illustrates a departure from how humanitarian programming has traditionally been designed and delivered. In Ukraine, the response supported by Oxfam was defined as partnership-centered because local partners designed the programs from inception, determining priorities, methodologies, budgets and implementation strategies based on their intimate knowledge of community needs and contexts. In contrast, partner-based responses tend to involve partners implementing programs that Oxfam has designed. The response in Ukraine is not unique within Oxfam; Oxfam has implemented similar approaches in Colombia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Kenya. However, in those contexts, Oxfam had an established presence and existing partnerships before transitioning to locally led models; in Ukraine Oxfam had **no prior presence before 2022** and adopted a **partnership-centered approach from the outset** of the response.

Rather than being a fixed outcome, the partnership-centered approach functions as an ongoing process of dialogue and relationship-building. Oxfam's role centers on providing relevant and effective support based on what partners identify as their needs, fostering a relationship-based model that demands continuous learning, flexibility and the adaptation of traditional power dynamics. As one Oxfam staff member described it:

> "In the Ukraine response, we have approached partnership as a meeting point: we align around strategies and values, and within that framework we try to decentralize decision-making and give up power" (KII Oxfam staff).

From the very beginning, the Ukraine response was shaped as an **adaptive management response**. The ambition was for it to be agile, able to respond to rapid changes in a fast-moving crisis, with extensive displacement at the onset.

2.1 INTENTIONAL PARTNERING: COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

The Ukraine response deliberately prioritized **partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs), women's rights organizations (WROs)** and other groups **led by and serving marginalized populations**. In the WASH sector, particularly for infrastructure rehabilitation, Oxfam established tripartite agreements with local municipalities and private contractors. This arrangement leveraged the technical expertise and operational role of municipal authorities, the implementation capacity of contractors, and Oxfam's role in providing funding, oversight, and technical support.

This intentional selection reflected Oxfam's commitment to support actors with deep community roots and strong connections to those most affected by the conflict. CBOs[11], often small volunteer-driven groups formed in response to the crisis focused exclusively on their community, its needs, and immediate relief. However, as the response evolved, Oxfam recognized that while CBOs played a critical role in immediate delivery of assistance, they often lacked the institutional and strategic capacity required for longer-term local leadership. As a result, Oxfam progressively phased out direct partnerships with CBOs, focusing instead on strengthening strategic partner organizations capable of supporting CBOs and volunteer initiatives within a more sustainable, locally led humanitarian system. Therefore, in the second phase of the partnership-centered response, Oxfam collaborated with seven strategic partners (see Box 1).

BOX 1: THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE PHASE 2 STRATEGIC PARTNERS

Gay Alliance Ukraine (GAU) is one of the leading Ukrainian NGOs working to protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. Since 2009, GAU has been offering direct support services, advocating for legal reforms, and fighting stigma through education and awareness.

Peaceful Heaven of Kharkiv (PHK) is a charitable foundation established in May 2022 in response to the conflict in Ukraine. Since then, PHK has grown into a team of 347 employees and 223 volunteers, delivering lifesaving humanitarian aid and implementing impactful projects across Kharkiv, as well as in frontline and border oblasts of Ukraine.

Charitable Foundation ROKADA has operated in Ukraine since 2003. Originally a provider of legal and social assistance to refugees and asylum seekers, ROKADA has grown into a nationwide network that delivers comprehensive services to IDPs, refugees, persons with disabilities, children, veterans and other vulnerable groups. The Foundation works in 17 regions of Ukraine, supported by 300 volunteers, and responds to community needs combining humanitarian relief with long-term programs.

Shchedryk is an NGO that delivers humanitarian aid and recovery support to people affected by the conflict in Ukraine. Since its creation in July 2022, the organization has played an important role in crisis response in the frontline regions of Mykolaiv and Kherson. In 2024, it became an official partner of the OCHA-led Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF).

The Tenth of April (TTA) is an NGO based in Odesa, dedicated to protecting human rights and providing critical support to Ukraine's most vulnerable populations, including refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs, and stateless individuals. Established in 2012 by a team of human rights activists and lawyers specializing in refugee rights, TTA now has a team of over 1000 dedicated staff and operates across 11 regions of Ukraine.

Voice of Romni (VoR) is a CSO in Ukraine committed to advancing the rights, safety, and wellbeing of Roma communities – particularly women and children. Founded in 2020, it is one of few Roma feminist organizations in Ukraine which works at the intersection of humanitarian response, social justice, and advocacy on systemic barriers facing Roma communities. VoR supports Roma-led initiatives, and brings attention to issues of discrimination, displacement, and gender-based violence.

Women's Consortium of Ukraine (WCU) is an NGO dedicated to promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of women and children in Ukraine. Founded in 2001, WCU unites 35 women-led organizations (WLOs) from all over the country. The organization works on creating lasting change while also responding to immediate humanitarian needs.

Source: Oxfam International (2025a)

2.2 KEY PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE

In addition to the partnership-centered response being a learning and adaptive response, it was underpinned by Oxfam's commitments to LHL, partnership and feminist principles (see section 7.1; see Annex 2). **Local Humanitarian Leadership** (LHL) recognizes and supports the leadership of those geographically and culturally closest to affected communities. It acknowledges that local and national organizations and groups, as well as government institutions, are best positioned to prepare for, respond to, and help communities recover from crises. Oxfam's role is to support from the sidelines, helping partners strengthen technical and financial systems, networks, gender and accountability

policies, so they can lead their own initiatives rather than implement externally designed interventions. This approach is focused on the power to lead, not only the capacity to deliver.[12]

Oxfam's feminist principles complement this agenda by promoting humanitarian action that is power-aware, intersectional and transformative (Oxfam GB, n.d.). They emphasize co-creation, care, mutual accountability, and solidarity, seeking to challenge unequal systems and amplify the leadership of women, marginalized groups and crisis-affected communities. Together, these principles underpin Oxfam's vision of a locally led, feminist humanitarian response, where equity, agency and collaboration drive both process and outcomes.

2.3 EVOLUTION OF THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE

The Ukraine response evolved significantly over time, reflecting Oxfam's transition from emergency delivery to strengthening local humanitarian leadership. The initial phase (2022–2023) was guided by a core humanitarian response strategy, revised in September 2023 to consolidate ongoing interventions and ensure coherence across the multi-country operation.

A major strategic shift occurred in February–March 2024, when Oxfam fleshed out its phase-out strategy and extended the response timeline from February 2025 to August 2026 to allow for a responsible and planned exit (see Figure 1). Although formal approval came in June–July 2024, implementation began as early as April 2024. This marked a qualitative turning point: the focus moved from partnership-centered program delivery to supporting partners' resilience and LHL outcomes, with strategic objectives centered on:

- Enhancing partners' access to financial resources.
- Increasing partners' participation in decision-making and coordination spaces, including advocacy and communications.
- Ensuring partners' ability to sustain humanitarian action independently.

This strategic pivot led to a reassessment of partnerships, reducing the portfolio from nearly 20 organizations to seven strategic partners. The selection of strategic partners focused on where Oxfam could add the greatest value in supporting partners' leadership and sustainability, excluding larger well-established actors as well as community-based groups, with priority given to partners working with marginalized communities or operating in high-need areas. The **Institutional Strengthening Initiative (ISI)** was introduced to support partners' organizational development. The ISI was launched in stages between February and May 2025, reflecting partners' readiness to finalize priorities and action plans. All ISI projects are set to conclude by June 2026. The extended timeframe was intentional, allowing for meaningful, long-term organizational change.

Complementary initiatives emerged during this period, notably the **Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF)**, developed through discussions starting in late 2022 and launched in 2025. The WHLF's first phase ran from March to August 2025, with a second phase planned from November 2025, focusing on women-led and feminist leadership in humanitarian action.[13] The WHLF is inspired from similar funds Oxfam already implements in development settings[14] to support WROs and WLOs leadership. The WHLF in Ukraine consists of fully flexible funding provided to WROs and WLOs with the purpose to enable these organizations to fulfil their core mandate. This is in recognition that too often WROs and WLOs in conflict affected contexts are funded to deliver humanitarian assistance and services often forcing them to shift their focus away from their core mandate.

The 2024 strategy also prompted internal restructuring, as Oxfam transitioned from a regional management model to a single-country structure following the phase-out of operations in Poland. Between July and October 2024, the regional and country structures were merged into a streamlined configuration aligned with the Ukraine-focused strategy.

FIGURE 1: OXFAM UKRAINE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TIMELINE

1

May 2022
First Oxfam partnership established in Ukraine response

2

July-August 2023
Romania and Moldova presence phased out

3

December 2023
Partnership Learning Review

4

January-March 2024
Strategy shift, including phase out strategy developed; criteria to identify strategic partners

5

April 2024
Start of new strategy implementation

6

July-October 2024
Oxfam change management process; regional and country structures merged into single, flattened structure; changes to all job descriptions

7

November 2024
Poland presence phased out

8

January 2025
Institutional Strengthening Initiative kick off meetings with all partners

9

March-August 2025
Pilot of Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund in collaboration with ActionAid

10

August 2025
Program support to partners finished

11

November 2025
Phase 2 of Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund in collaboration with ActionAid, LHL, Partnership and Program Learning Review

12

May 2026
End of Response Learning Review

13

June 2026
Institution Strengthening Initiative and Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund Phase 2 close

14

July-August 2026
Minimal structure left focused on legal and formal close out activities

3.ADAPTING INTERNAL PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES TO ENABLE A PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE

3. ADAPTING INTERNAL PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES TO ENABLE A PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE

As an **out-of-presence response**, business support for the Ukraine operation was provided by Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam GB), requiring the response to operate under Oxfam's existing systems and procedures. This arrangement was both essential and challenging. While it ensured compliance and continuity, it also demanded greater effort to adapt ways of working, procedures and systems to a context where no in-country structures previously existed.

The main internal changes include**d due diligence (DD), partnership agreements, financial arrangements and reporting**. Some areas such as **internal audit** remained unchanged. Survey results revealed a mixed picture: both Oxfam staff and partners identified Oxfam's risk and compliance systems as the third-most significant challenge and simultaneously the third-most significant success in supporting a partnership-centered response. This apparent contradiction reflects the reality that, from the outset, some systems and processes were adapted while others evolved much later in the response. It may also indicate that, although efforts were made to reduce the burden of DD, the requirements nonetheless remained time-consuming. In several cases, it was not the systems or processes themselves but the way they were applied that enabled progress toward a genuinely partnership-centered model.

For several of these changes, detailed partner feedback on how they perceived or experienced them was limited either because adjustments applied to newly onboarded partners or because partners were not always aware of the underlying systems being adapted. Overall, partners consistently described the partnership as smooth and supportive, and any specific challenges they did raise are reflected in the relevant sections.

3.1 LEARNING FROM ADAPTING INTERNAL PROCESSES

3.3.1 Due diligence assessment

Oxfam's partnership assessment framework, which combines compliance verification, risk analysis, and capacity assessment, formed the formal basis for partner engagement in Ukraine. The process normally involves a comprehensive institutional review covering governance, safeguarding, finance, logistics, and accountability systems, designed primarily for longer-term partnerships.

However, in the fast-paced and high-volume context of the Ukraine crisis, with an entirely new portfolio of partners, this standard DD process proved too cumbersome. Under pressure to disburse funds rapidly and operationalize partnerships, the response team together with the relevant Oxfam affiliates simplified and adapted internal tools and procedures, creating a **Ukraine-tailored DD tool** focused on core risk and eligibility checks rather than full institutional assessments. This ensured minimum compliance standards while enabling faster partner formalization and fund disbursement. For organizations that joined early in 2022–2023, initial assessments were retained and not re-done to avoid duplication and administrative delays. Although Oxfam's global Capacity and Partnership Assessment System (CAPAS)[15] is still under development, the Ukraine-adapted DD tool embodied the same philosophy: a proportionate and flexible approach to partner assessment. As one interviewee noted, *"Ukraine's adapted tool anticipated that philosophy and was lighter and more appropriate than the old model"* (KII Oxfam staff).

The Ukraine tool format itself reflects this **more dialogical and reflexive model**, shifting the focus from a one-sided compliance review to a shared reflection on partnership relevance and accountability. It began with the question, *"Should we work together as partners, in general?,"* inviting Oxfam to first assess its own strategic fit and added value before assessing the partner. This first section guided Oxfam through a series of internal reflections across three dimensions:

- **Oxfam's contribution to the partnership** including its history of working with partners in the area, experience with similar issues, cultural and value alignment, and whether Oxfam was indeed the best source of expertise, funding, or connections for that partner.
- **Capacity to deliver** assessing Oxfam's own skills and experience to support this type of partnership effectively.
- **Oxfam's accountability to the partner** checking whether the partner was aware of Oxfam's partnership policy and complaints mechanisms, and identifying what mechanisms were in place for the partner to hold Oxfam accountable, have visibility over Oxfam's broader work in-country, and address issues as they arose.

Only after this internal reflection did the tool move to partner-specific questions, examining strategic fit (mission, purpose, values, stance on gender and safeguarding), involvement of people and communities affected by the crisis, financial and legal systems, governance, engagement with others, and known achievements and challenges. This structure reinforced the principle of mutual accountability - positioning Oxfam as an active participant in the partnership's quality and not merely a compliance assessor.

Improved coordination and shared ownership of DD also marked a significant shift. Initially, DD was managed by one or two individuals within Oxfam Ukraine, which led to some gaps and a higher burden on partners. Learning from this, Oxfam broadened internal participation: partnership, finance, safeguarding, program, communications staff jointly reviewing documentation and clarifying findings before engaging partners. This cross-functional and better-prepared approach improved both the quality and consistency of assessments while reducing repetitive requests to partners and shifting discussions with partners toward content rather than form.

The **Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF)** provided a concrete example of how this adapted model operated effectively for smaller or less formal organizations. WHLF partners were able to access funds despite limited systems or staffing, through calculated flexibility grounded in trust and continuous dialogue. As one staff member explained, *"for WHLF partners, we went back to CAPAS, consulted our Oxfam advisors, and updated our due diligence template. Our approach was lighter in the sense that we did a lot of homework ourselves before approaching the partner"* (KII Oxfam staff).

While passporting arrangements[16] were discussed at Confederation level, evidence of systematic use in Ukraine remains limited. Nevertheless, the Ukraine DD experience drew both inspiration from and informed the global CAPAS process, providing a live example of how to operationalize proportionate DD in practice.

3.1.2 Partnership agreement and financial flexibility

Oxfam used its **standard partnership agreement template for all types of partners in Ukraine**, including strategic partners, WHLF partners, and CBOs. The same core structure was maintained, but its application became lighter and more flexible, depending on the type and capacity of each partner.

> **"We use the same agreement template for all partners, including CBOs, regardless of organization size or project type. Over time, we simplified the template a little, but the core structure remained the same"** (KII Oxfam staff).

All agreements were issued in both English and Ukrainian, not only to ensure accessibility for partners but also to comply with Ukrainian legal requirements. While a legal requirement, other INGOs often provided agreements in English only, leaving Ukrainian partners to translate them into Ukrainian. The introduction in the agreement set out the expected preparatory discussions before signature,

including clarity on roles and responsibilities, capacity to deliver, shared understanding of project deliverables, and an agreed exit strategy at the end of the project. Each agreement also included a standard ethical clause aligned with humanitarian principles, explicitly prohibiting the use of any Oxfam funds (including project funds and Indirect Cost Recovery (ICR)) for military purposes or to support military entities.

Disbursement schedules and financial modalities varied across agreement types. Program agreements and ISI agreements released funds in three main tranches, while WHLF grants provided 90% upfront and 10% on completion - later adjusted to 100% upfront to ease liquidity constraints for small WLOs. To reduce administrative bottlenecks, Oxfam introduced greater flexibility: the 80% expenditure rule remained for strategic partners but was applied more flexibly toward project closure, while partners could reallocate up to 10% of their budget through simple notification rather than formal amendment. For WHLF partners, budget changes only needed to align with agreed principles and be communicated to Oxfam. This was facilitated by the type of funding Oxfam received which allowed greater financial flexibility.

In parallel, the Ukraine team developed **simplified, partner-friendly financial tools**[17] to enhance accessibility and oversight. These included linked budget and expenditure templates supported by standard operating procedures and clear guidance. Tools were tailored to partner capacity: experienced organizations used advanced formats, while smaller or first-time partners were provided with simplified tables and closer accompaniment.

3.1.3 Reporting

Reporting systems evolved slightly over the course of the response, reflecting a gradual shift from compliance-driven oversight to more **collaborative and proportionate accountability mechanisms**. At the outset, partners were required to submit monthly narrative and financial reports, creating a heavy administrative burden voiced by all partners organizations consulted for this review as well as the first learning review (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam, 2024). Over time, reporting schedules were progressively rationalized and simplified: by the final six months of implementation, most strategic partners were submitting reports on a quarterly basis. Monthly financial reporting used a simplified tool with only essential documentation, while the interim narrative report focused on progress toward self-defined objectives, the value of flexibility, early outcomes, and partnership learning. For strategic partners, an online reporting system using the Box platform was introduced in the final phase of implementation, enabling live feedback and real-time review and updates between Oxfam and partners.

In parallel, Oxfam introduced co-designed and participatory reporting formats, particularly within the ISI and WHLF portfolios. For example, in the WHLF final reporting process, Oxfam replaced traditional written submissions with a more accessible and collaborative approach. The team held online discussion meetings with partners, took notes during the conversations, drafted the reports based on these exchanges, and then shared them back with partners for review and validation. Field visits complemented these discussions, and "end-line discussion documents" were used to capture key achievements and lessons learned jointly. This approach helped partners overcome language and reporting challenges while strengthening mutual understanding.

3.2 WHAT WORKED WELL

3.2.1 Leadership creating an enabling environment

A defining enabler of Oxfam's adaptive and partnership-oriented approach in Ukraine was the **alignment and trust cascading from the highest levels of leadership**: from Oxfam International and Oxfam GB to the Program Management Unit (PMU) and Country Offices. The response operated under a shared commitment across all tiers of leadership to act decisively, take calculated risks, and prioritize LHL and feminist principles over procedural rigidity. Leadership provided a clear and consistent mandate for flexibility, setting the tone for a response culture grounded in trust and partnership. As one senior leader recalled, *"At that time, leadership made it very clear: if it's not partnership-centered, if it's not feminist, and if it's not safe, we're not going to do it"* (KII Oxfam staff). This top-level direction gave country teams the confidence to adapt systems rapidly and supported the simplification of DD and other internal processes allowing for timely partnership engagement and funding disbursement. This explicit endorsement created psychological safety and organizational cover for teams to act pragmatically and creatively, embedding a "learn-as-we-go" ethos within defined risk parameters. Instead of waiting for perfect information, staff were encouraged to take proportionate risks, make decisions quickly, and adjust as learning emerged.

3.2.2 High levels of flexible funding coupled with enabling risk appetite from leadership

However, several staff also reflected critically that this openness **was not context neutral**. Oxfam staff acknowledged that Ukraine benefitted from European political support leading to exceptional levels of available and flexible funding which in itself enabled Oxfam to implement its partnership approach. Leadership willingness to take risks was important, and staff noted that a deliberate decision was made to prioritize flexible funding streams - an internal choice that also contributed to leadership having the space and confidence to adopt a higher risk appetite and pursue a more partnership-centered model. Some Oxfam staff also felt that the European setting also enabled a different risk appetite within Oxfam at different levels of leadership (international and country level) and more trust to try new ways of partnering.

Oxfam's risk appetite across its leadership coupled with the **exceptional level of available and flexible funding** created space for creativity, experimentation, and partnership-centered design rarely possible in more resource-constrained settings.

Building on this space, the team piloted new funding and reporting models, for example through WHLF, where Oxfam engaged with the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) under a collective initiative framework. This model introduced lump-sum grants and simplified, outcome-focused reporting based on actual spending at project completion, illustrating that trust and accountability can coexist when learning is prioritized over compliance.

3.2.3 Flexibility and agility within existing processes

The most effective enabler of the partnership-centered response was Oxfam's **adaptive use of its existing systems and procedures** - not by replacing them, but by applying them with greater flexibility, proportionality, and trust. Across partnership management, reporting, and compliance functions, staff and partners described a marked shift toward solution-oriented and user-friendly practices, allowing responsiveness without compromising accountability. Findings from the survey reinforced these perceptions: both staff and partners identified flexibility and responsiveness in addressing process and template issues as a top success factor.

DD processes were reimagined as dialogical exercises rather than administrative hurdles. Oxfam improving its preparatory work for DD improved the quality of engagement: *"We no longer send 40 questions to partners; we come with 10 good ones and have a proper conversation"* (KII Oxfam staff). In-person exchanges then centered on validating and contextualizing information. Keeping Oxfam's team small and balanced during these meetings also helped foster open dialogue and turned compliance into a space for relationship-building, a conversation rather than a checklist.

In relation to partnership agreements, Oxfam maintained its standard templates but interpreted them more flexibly in practice. Budget realignments and activity amendments were accepted rapidly, allowing partners to adapt to fast-changing operational realities. Activities were often allowed to continue while formal amendments were being processed. In some cases, partners were even permitted to use their own reporting or financial formats when justified. Flexibility was not about lowering standards but about clarifying expectations:

> "Sometimes it is just about adapting in ways that do not lower the standard, but make it simpler - using clear, accessible language so it is user-friendly for partners. We ourselves struggled with funder requirements, but once we understood them, we could translate them for partners" (KII Oxfam staff).

This flexibility was crucial for responding to dynamic, unpredictable contexts. As one partner noted, *"If we would need something because of blackout and needed to transfer funds and buy a power station for our office, Oxfam approved it really fast. It was great and helpful for us as a partner working on the ground"* (KII Partner). Partners consistently described Oxfam's internal systems as *complex but clear and responsive*, enabling smooth collaboration and faster problem-solving. This agility reinforced trust and comfort and was repeatedly recognized by both staff and partners as one of Oxfam's strongest comparative advantages.

3.3 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS WITH ADAPTING INTERNAL PROCESSES

3.3.1 Some internal systems still not fit for a partnership-centered response

There was still some systemic misalignment between intent and instruments. Teams repeatedly noted that internal systems have not adapted fast enough to match the ambitions of the Ukraine response: *"We haven't really challenged ourselves enough on why certain steps exist, or what the experience feels like from a partner perspective"* (KII Oxfam staff). The structure of the response ultimately fit the involvement of larger national NGOs better than CBOs. Efforts to tailor DD for smaller partners remained confined within existing frameworks rather than generating a truly adapted model.

Financial planning and funding design lacked adequate adaptation. Although Oxfam had access to multi-year donor funding, this was not cascaded to partners. Instead, most received a sequence of short-term agreements and frequent top-ups, which fragmented financial planning and limited their ability to invest strategically or sustain longer-term impact. This pattern was partly driven by Oxfam's internal visibility constraints on available funds but also by the structure of external mechanisms, particularly the DEC appeal, which released funding in eight separate top-up tranches in Ukraine instead of the standard four.[18] This was also a way for Oxfam to manage financial risks and the low absorption capacity of some partners. As a result, partners faced multiple contract amendments and shifting timelines, at times *"dropping emergency top-ups"* on partners (KII Oxfam staff) which reduced predictability and added administrative workload. Several partners reflected that, had they known about the longer-term funding horizon or received multi-year agreements from the outset, they would have designed their projects significantly differently and more strategically. The discussion

on cascading multi-year funding never took place with partners, reflecting an internal logic primarily shaped by risk management considerations. Moreover, while Oxfam Ukraine aimed to plan and budget on an 18-month operational cycle to match with this last phase of the response, Oxfam systems remained tied to annual financial planning, forcing the team to create workarounds and parallel tracking tools, adding administrative complexity.

Internal audit frameworks remain structural barriers. Internal audits were consistently described as misaligned with the partnership-centered model, reflecting a legacy compliance culture rooted in direct implementation. Audit teams continued to apply templates and criteria focused on Oxfam's internal control systems rather than on the quality of partnership practice, using compliance benchmarks that *"mean nothing in a partnership-centered response"* (KII Oxfam staff). This old compliance logic, based on *"outdated templates and rigid criteria"* (KII Oxfam staff), failed to capture the flexibility (including financial) and contextual adaptation that characterized the Ukraine response. For example, findings related to program management were described as *"completely at odds with the partnership-centered approach... they request a certain benchmark that does not mean quality"* (KII Oxfam staff).

Despite these tensions, the Ukraine team ultimately passed its internal audit, demonstrating that flexibility and compliance can coexist. Managers consciously accepted certain risks, choosing not to *"put in place processes just to comply with an audit that contradicts what we are trying to do"* (KII Oxfam staff), instead standing by the partnership-centered approach. The experience highlighted both the **resilience of leadership support** and the need for systemic reform. In practice, staff were left to constantly translate between what the system measures (i.e., instruments, legacy Oxfam systems), and what the partnership model seeks to achieve.

3.3.2 Process comfort and uneven adaptation

Despite a strong leadership mandate for flexibility and adaptive learning, the cultural shift toward truly streamlined, adaptive ways of working have been gradual and uneven. Many staff acknowledged that while leadership created the space to act boldly, changing long-standing habits of control and over-justification required sustained effort: *"It still surprises me how much process has to go into changes - two-hour discussions just to simplify one form"* (KII Oxfam staff).

Roles traditionally oriented toward ensuring compliance and adherence to procedures found it particularly challenging to balance flexibility with the need to "work by the book": *"It is hard to put partners first when your role is to protect Oxfam and be accountable to internal audit. Nobody will blame you for being cautious"* (KII Oxfam staff). The persistence of audit frameworks that were not adapted to the response context placed some staff in a difficult position where the expectations of compliance and the intent of a partnership-centered, flexible approach could feel at odds. This "shadow of internal audit" created a sense of tension and self-censorship, particularly in day-to-day operational decisions.

The tendency to retreat to process as a form of safety - often resurfacing whenever an adaptation was needed - led to self-censorship and hesitation to test new approaches. Teams described a mindset of *"this will never be approved"* (KII Oxfam staff), which, at times, discouraged experimentation and slowed adaptations. This mindset contrasts with calls from the Response leadership to embrace greater experimentation and learning. As one Oxfam staff expressed, *"we need to be bolder - more vulnerable. Let's try something, see where it takes us, and revise. There is a difference between assessing risk and listing every reason why not to leave your comfort zone"* (KII Oxfam staff).

These patterns did not always reflect resistance to change but rather a deeply ingrained culture of procedural caution, where following established steps was equated with accountability. As one staff member explained:

> **"We were continuously pulling people out of their comfort zone. The tendency is always to fall back on process because it feels safe. But the real question is: did the process actually give you what you needed? That depends entirely on how you used it"** (KII Oxfam staff).

Even well-intentioned efforts to streamline internal procedures and mechanisms often became mired in lengthy internal discussions and justification loops. For example, the shift to quarterly reporting only took place in the final six months of implementation, with staff acknowledging that monthly reporting could have been dropped much earlier. Partners also faced practical and linguistic barriers: *"Reporting in English was difficult… At first, my husband helped as an interpreter"* (KII Partner). Oxfam adapted its approach to reduce these barriers and Ukrainian was accepted for WHLF reporting and proposals. During program implementation, most post distribution monitoring (PDM) reports were submitted in Ukrainian, with Oxfam managing internal translation. ISI monitoring meetings were also organized according to partners' language preferences.

3.3.3 Learning flexibility as a practice

Both staff and partners reflected that **flexibility itself has to be learned** - a practice developed over time rather than an inherent feature of Oxfam's and partners' ways of working. As one Oxfam staff said, *"flexibility is something we have to learn. It does not come naturally"* (KII Oxfam staff).

This learning process revealed that flexibility must operate at two levels - **as a mindset and as a skillset**. As a mindset, it requires trust, curiosity, and the confidence to act amid uncertainty. As a skillset, it demands the practical ability to translate that trust into action - by adapting systems, simplifying processes, and making proportionate decisions. While many staff and partners embraced flexibility conceptually, applying it in practice often proved more complex, constrained by habitual reliance on procedures and written validation.

While the response introduced simplified and participatory approaches, some partners still preferred more formal procedures. For instance, when offered the option to report verbally, only two of seven partners took this opportunity; the rest continued to submit written reports, viewing them as essential tools for tracking their own progress. Others expressed that their internal governance systems required formal approvals or written documentation, making fully informal processes impractical. In one instance, a partner submitted a list of planned activities and corresponding costs for donor approval, as required by their own internal rules. Oxfam's reply - *"why are you asking us, do as you see fit"*- was meant to convey trust and flexibility but instead created discomfort. Without a formal record, the partner felt exposed within its own organizational framework, leading to repeated back-and-forth and delays.

Flexibility does not mean the absence of structure, but rather the ability to adapt to partners' systems, comfort levels, and decision-making processes. Effective flexibility supports local agency, allowing partners to exercise leadership confidently within both their own frameworks and Oxfam's. Staff also acknowledged that flexibility without support can be counterproductive and felt that providing coaching and reassurance helped build confidence in decision-making. The key learning is that flexibility and compliance are not inherently at odds. However, genuine flexibility requires both mindset and skillset change. Without deeper system redesign and cultural adaptation, flexibility remains vulnerable and dependent on individual relationships and leadership endorsement rather than an embedded institutional habit.

3.3.4 Managing Oxfam's own risks in partnership-centered response

Oxfam's Ukraine response carried a **distinctive risk profile**, shaped by its partnership-centered, out-of-presence operating model and by the high visibility of the Ukraine crisis, which attracted intense public, donor and media scrutiny. Partnership-centered responses are often **perceived** to require a higher degree of risk tolerance than traditional Oxfam-implemented responses, particularly in managing financial and compliance risks. In practice, however, this perception does not necessarily reflect greater exposure to risk, but rather a shift in how risk is distributed, managed and documented. Within this context, the Ukraine team focused on balancing flexibility with accountability, consciously tailoring compliance mechanisms and accepting a higher level of perceived risk to enable rapid delivery and genuine partner leadership:

> **"We have really been pushing the boundaries on balancing the risks we take by simplifying systems. Because, of course, whenever you simplify compliance or due diligence, on paper you are increasing risk. But substantively you are not actually increasing risk"** (KII Oxfam staff).

The use of highly flexible funding sources such as DEC appeal funds and unrestricted resources allowed Oxfam to apply a pragmatic stance on financial and documentation requirements. This approach prioritized proportionality and contextual judgement over procedural uniformity, creating space for adaptive management while maintaining oversight.

Oxfam adopted a risk-based approach to financial management, using capacity assessments to identify potential gaps and tailor support accordingly. This included targeted training, joint reviews of financial documentation, and close accompaniment from finance teams. By investing in strengthening partners' internal controls, Oxfam mitigated fiduciary and operational risks while reinforcing partners' ownership of financial systems.

Procurement compliance emerged as one of the most sensitive areas and **a recurring challenge**. Partners often struggled to interpret or apply Oxfam's procurement standards. In response, Oxfam introduced adaptive accompaniment measures embedding finance or logistics staff in procurement meetings, not to approve or control, but to advise. This system was ad hoc by nature as it was based on responding to isolated queries rather than working jointly with partners to develop systems or structures.

There were missed opportunities for early and systematic engagement. Several staff reflected that financial and procurement engagement began too late, often after issues had surfaced. Policies were shared at the time of signing partnership agreements, but little time was devoted to discussing their intent or application. As one team member described, the aim should have been to *"sit next to them and help them cross the river"* (KII Oxfam staff), offering hands-on accompaniment from the outset rather than reactive troubleshooting once problems arose.

Several staff reflected that, on paper, **a partnership-centered response can appear riskier** particularly in terms of compliance and fiduciary oversight. Some noted that in a few instances, compliance risks could have materialized if the response had been under greater institutional donor scrutiny, but this was primarily due to an imperfect paper trail rather than any misuse of funds or unethical behavior. In practice, no significant financial or operational risks materialized. This perception was further challenged by Oxfam's internal audit of the Ukraine response, which awarded a medium grade confirming overall compliance and effective internal controls. This outcome illustrates that, despite the perception of higher risk, a partnership-centered response can meet organizational standards when supported by adaptive oversight. More broadly, wider sectoral evidence shows that perceptions of risk especially among donors and INGOs tend to overstate fiduciary and reputational risks while

underestimating the capacity of local actors to mitigate other types of risk, such as those related to access, contextual understanding, or responsiveness.

The Ukraine experience demonstrated that contextualizing and tailoring systems and processes not only do not inherently increase risk but can actively mitigate it by ensuring controls are proportionate, better understood and more consistently applied. It also underscored the need to redefine how institutional risk is understood and managed within a partnership-centered model, including the distinctions between risk transfer, risk sharing, and risk ownership. While the 2023 learning review had recommended establishing a formal risk management process and response-level risk register (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam, 2024), it was not evident to this review that this had been implemented. Although the response adopted what seemed to be a more deliberate risk-based approach in practice, this was not anchored in a formalized risk management process or overarching risk register. As recognized in the Oxfam Ukraine Humanitarian Response Strategy (Phase 2), locally led responses require an intentional and explicitly designed scheme for risk sharing between Oxfam and its partners, representing a shift from one-sided control toward more balanced, shared accountability.

3.3.5 Addressing risks to partners

Partners consistently identified three main risk areas:

• Staff wellbeing and burnout, including psychosocial and physical safety for staff operating near frontlines.
• Security risks, particularly related to mobility and operational exposure.
• Financial sustainability, partly due to dependence on Oxfam funding.

Several partners described a personalized rather than organizational framing of risks: *"Our team worked very hard to deliver results, and somehow, we forgot about the team itself […] and sustainable and systematic care for them. This is not exactly an organizational risk; it is more my personal pain."* (KII Partner). One partner noted that while Oxfam would likely have been supportive, *"we managed it ourselves"* (KII Partner), suggesting the absence of dialogue spaces on risks that could have surfaced these vulnerabilities earlier. In the case of staff wellbeing, partners should lead their own mitigation strategies, with Oxfam supporting them within a broader shared risk framework such as co-design and enabling budget requests on staff wellbeing.

Several partners also highlighted the limited institutionalization of risk mitigation within the Ukrainian CSO landscape:

> **"Many Ukrainian CSOs do not yet have a proven practical or scientific approach to risk mitigation. Even when there are significant risks such as security concerns, formalizing them or developing a formal plan to address them does not receive the attention it deserves"** (KII Partner).

Partners often described risk management as a matter of daily adaptation and practical problem-solving, rather than a structured organizational function.

Partners and Oxfam also operate within **different risk paradigms** shaped by distinct mandates, operating contexts, and histories. While Oxfam may tend to frame risk within institutional compliance (fiduciary, reputational risks and duty-of-care frameworks), many partners, particularly rights-based and activist organizations, operate with a higher risk appetite, accepting exposure as part of their frontline engagement and advocacy work. These differing paradigms influence not only how risks are perceived and managed, but also how openly they are discussed.

There were gaps in shared understanding and integration of risks sharing. While risk sharing became a frequent term in internal and external discussions, its meaning remained conceptually ambiguous:

> "We are not still there. We should be clearer about what we mean when we speak about risk sharing and risk transfer. We talk in a generic way – without unpacking programmatic, security, administrative, financial, and legal implications" (KII Oxfam staff).

Most staff interviewed primarily reflected in terms of risks to Oxfam rather than risks to partners, illustrating how organizational compliance frameworks and mindset still tend to shape risk perceptions. This limited the development of consistent practices across departments and in enabling open risk conversations.

Although **risk matrices** were systematically developed as part of every project proposal, they logically focused on project-specific activities rather than broader organizational or partnership risks. Some matrices for examples did highlight concerns related to staff safety and security, wellbeing, safeguarding, etc. However, there was no structured mechanism to follow up on these risks as part of the partnership or to escalate them beyond the project level. In addition, the matrices do not include a dedicated column or process to identify how Oxfam could support partners in mitigating these risks, limiting their usefulness as tools for joint analysis and shared accountability.

While risks span multiple domains (i.e., security, safety, wellbeing, fiduciary, reputational, and operational), there was no shared institutional framework for integrating these into partnership management. The absence of **established spaces for jointly discussing risks** with partners limited opportunities to reflect on how risks were distributed and managed between Oxfam and partner organizations, and to promote a more deliberate, balanced approach to risk sharing.

For example, security risk management remained siloed from partnership processes. Historically, Oxfam's security teams were focused on staff safety and security, with minimal engagement with partner organizations. This separation meant that security considerations were not systematically factored into DD processes, and no joint risk assessments were conducted between Oxfam and its partners. The issue was compounded by the fact that job descriptions and the country structure did not evolve to institutionalize partner-facing safety and security support. Only in the later stages of the response did partners begin to receive direct assistance, such as introductions to the International NGO Security Organization (INSO), or access to security templates and standard operating procedures, support to prepare for a security audit, etc. However, this support remained limited to a few closely engaged partners, rather than being a standard component of partnership accompaniment. Oxfam staff also noted that some partners did not actively request security support, potentially reflecting both differing perceptions of security risk and a lack of established channels for dialogue on this issue.[19]

When unpacking this question with staff, it became clear that risk sharing within the Ukraine response was intentional to some extent,[20] but undocumented. Risk management and risk sharing were often embedded rather than treated as a distinct area of dialogue: *"The way we discuss risk management is embedded in other discussions; when it stands alone, it becomes difficult to formulate clear thoughts around it"* (Oxfam staff, validation workshop, Kyiv). This integration kept discussions practical but also limited opportunities for collective reflection and structured learning about risk sharing itself. As a result, while Oxfam's approach to risk sharing was real and deliberate, it lacked formal documentation and structure which is what turns intentional practice into institutionalized risk management.[21]

From 2024 onwards, several developments reflected a more deliberate and explicit approach to risk sharing, even if not yet supported by dedicated systems or documentation. The introduction of ICR sharing in 2024 marked a structural - albeit late[22] - step towards addressing funding inequities within partnership arrangements, providing partners with flexible funds to mitigate their risks and strengthen internal systems. Through the ISI, partners accessed resources to address psychosocial and organizational vulnerabilities, for example by funding psychological consultations and staff retreats focused on wellbeing and safety or first-aid training. The strong demand for such activities revealed how significant these needs were, yet they could only be meaningfully addressed once the ISI became available in 2025. This highlights both the importance of flexible, dedicated resources for risk management and the potential missed opportunity to support partners on these issues earlier in the response.

Over time, partners noted that risk discussions gradually became more explicit and were increasingly embedded in regular partner meetings. As these practices developed, Oxfam's open and dialogical approach also helped surface and address, for example, legal and financial risks collaboratively: *"We were able to highlight legal risks together—like the taxation of aid—and put mitigation in place. We felt the risks were shared and not just on us"* (KII partner).

Beyond these targeted mechanisms, Oxfam's broader partnership ethos and flexibility acted as de facto risk-sharing mechanisms. This included having partners lead program design and decision-making therefore aligning these to their own risk appetite and including budget for risk mitigation measures; having flexible funding and adaptive approach to adjust budget and activities as needed; investing in relationships and having trust-based dialogue which encourage collective problem-solving rather than punitive oversight supporting organizational resilience; and adapted compliance which did not increase partners to administrative or delivery risks. Together, these practices show that risk sharing must cut across all aspects of the partnering relationship and management cycle. In a partnership-centered response, this means reviewing the entire cycle through a risk-sharing lens to ensure it is embedded not only in tools, processes, and funding modalities, but also in day-to-day interactions and behaviors.

4. TEAM STRUCTURE, CULTURE AND SKILLS

4.1 TEAM RESTRUCTURE

4.1.1 Embedding partnerships and LHL at the centre

The 2024 restructure placed LHL and partnerships at the heart of Oxfam's Ukraine country structure. This marked a deliberate move from supporting partners' program delivery through selected functions to positioning the entire team **as a service to partners**. To achieve this, from operations to MEAL, advocacy and fundraising, roles across the response were repositioned to directly support partners' systems, leadership, and organizational sustainability. Nearly all job descriptions were updated to include responsibilities related to LHL and partners' institutional strengthening.

In addition, new senior roles were created to ensure coherence and institutional anchoring of LHL across the response. **A LHL and Program Manager position** was introduced at Senior Management Team (SMT) level, responsible for ensuring that the partnership-based approach informed program decisions, strategic planning, and cross-functional coordination.

At the operational level, a **LHL and Partnerships Coordinator role** replaced the previous PMU Partnership Advisor, combining strategic and technical responsibilities. The position provides direction on partnership principles, manages key relationships with partners, and oversees the coherence of support across departments, ensuring that each function operates as part of a unified accompaniment system rather than in isolation. Partnership Officers continued to lead on day-to-day partner engagement and monitoring, operating under matrix supervision from the central partnerships function.

4.1.1 Reprofiling of the funding position

The 2024 restructure also redefined the funding function, shifting it from a transactional role focused on grant management to a strategic one centered on partner accompaniment and LHL. The former Funding Coordinator position was reprofiled and retitled **LHL Business Development Manager** (BDM) to reflect its new focus on supporting partners' resource mobilization, organizational development, and engagement with donors. This transformation positioned the LHL BDM as both a strategic enabler and a learning broker, linking partner experience with donor expectations and ensuring that funding processes reinforced rather than constrained LHL goals.

A Grants Officer position was created to take on transactional aspects of grant management, allowing the BDM to concentrate on partnership-focused resource development and adaptive funding mechanisms. Although both roles were initially placed within the program unit as part of the restructuring, they were later moved under the Country Director, with the LHL BDM becoming a member of the SMT.

4.1.3 Reorientation of advocacy, campaign and engagement

The 2024 restructure also redefined Oxfam's advocacy and communications roles, aligning them fully with the partnership-centered vision. Rather than advancing Oxfam's own messaging, advocacy and communications specialists now act as amplifiers of partners' voices, supporting local organizations to shape and lead their own narratives. As one team member explained, they increasingly "see [their] role as an amplifier of the voices of our partners rather than our own advocacy agenda… often staying quiet and taking a step back" (KII Oxfam staff). Advocacy and communications positions therefore remained in place but with the explicit mandate to represent partners' perspectives and priorities, not Oxfam's. The reorientation placed greater emphasis on partner-focused influencing and communications, with staff providing direct support for partners to develop their advocacy strategies, strengthen leadership within Ukraine, and enhance communications capacities linked to fundraising and organizational growth. This includes facilitating access to, and meaningful participation in,

national advocacy spaces, a central component of Oxfam's responsible exit strategy (Oxfam Ukraine Response, 2024).

In parallel, Oxfam Advocacy Campaigns and Engagement team (ACE team) continues to engage in system-level influencing, using learning from the Ukraine response to inform global humanitarian policy and debates on localization and protection. The ACE team plays a key role in this, collaborating with advocacy and policy focal points across the confederation to translate operational experience into policy influence (Ibid.) In practice, the ACE team now works closely with partnership and business development colleagues to integrate communications into partner support for fundraising, visibility, and networking. Their role has become one of accompaniment rather than representation helping partners articulate their messages, access platforms, and engage confidently with donors and decision-makers.

4.1.4 Cross-functional and culture shift

The 2024 restructure also introduced a deeper cultural transformation, embedding a **relationship-based model of collaboration across the team**. Oxfam staff were encouraged to engage directly with their counterparts in partner organizations (e.g., LHL BDM with partners' fundraising staff) while maintaining coherence and accountability through the partnership function. This approach aimed to maximize technical exchange and responsiveness without creating bottlenecks or overloading partners.

Recruitment under the new structure placed equal emphasis on soft skills, interpersonal communication, and alignment with LHL values, alongside technical expertise (Oxfam Ukraine Response, 2025). Staff widely described a *"real change in culture and attitude,"* marked by stronger coordination, collaboration and openness across teams.

4.2 WHAT WORKED WELL

The 2024 strategic shift toward a service-to-partners model coincided with, and may have contributed to, a period of greater stability and reduced staff turnover, resolving one of the main challenges identified in the first phase of the response (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam International, 2024). This stability allowed Oxfam to embed the new strategy more intentionally: all staff were inducted into updated job descriptions, and the approach was reflected in team plans and individual objectives. As one team member summarized the shift, *"We are no longer deliverers, we are enablers"* (KII Oxfam staff).

Oxfam also sought to retain as much institutional knowledge as possible, encouraging staff to stay through the transition and supporting them to take on new areas of work and greater responsibility. The restructuring also addressed earlier tensions between the regional PMU and the country offices. The response moved from operating as four separate country responses to a single, coherent structure, which facilitated greater cross-functional coordination and enabled technical advisors to play a more strategic role.

4.2.1 Clarified expectations, right people, right attitude

The 2024 strategy explicitly defined working with partners as a core competency for all staff. Revised job descriptions, clearer expectations, and adapted induction processes ensured that every function from programs to operations was reoriented to serve partners' needs rather than oversee delivery. The restructuring process strengthened alignment between staff profiles and the demands of a partnership-centered model. Teams were intentionally composed of individuals with the right attitude, relational intelligence, and curiosity to make the model work in practice. Both staff and partners noted that the current team *"fits the positions and understands the concept of partnership very well"*

(KII Partner). Partners consistently highlighted Oxfam staff's empathy and respect for local expertise: *"It was very important to feel they were trying to learn our context and that we, as local actors, are the experts"* (KII partner).

The restructure also broke down silos and strengthened horizontal coordination across the team. Functions that had previously worked in parallel, such as funding, advocacy, communications, and operations, began collaborating more systematically around partner needs. Staff described a shift from fragmented support to joint planning and collective problem-solving, reflecting a more coherent and partnership-oriented way of working. **Physical co-location** of teams in Kyiv further accelerated this shift, dissolving functional barriers that had previously limited cross-team collaboration.

Importantly, the new structure enabled all staff and not only focal points to build direct relationships with partners. Team members were encouraged to engage directly where relevant, while the partnership function maintained oversight to ensure coherence and to avoid overwhelming partners. This approach helped create a sense that partnership is not a function but a collective way of working embedded across the whole team.

The arrival of the new Partnership Coordinator in 2024 was widely described as a turning point. The role brought structure, coherence, and a more strategic, solution-oriented way of working across the team. Staff described this function as acting like a partnership union representative, ensuring that partners' perspectives and needs are embedded in internal decision-making processes.

4.2.2 Relational and human approach

Partners reflected that successful collaboration was not about Oxfam's capacities, it is also about choosing the right person who is responsible for the development of partnerships. The credibility of Oxfam staff was therefore rooted not in their expertise alone, but in their relational intelligence and consistency in embodying the partnership principles in daily interactions. The Ukraine response demonstrated clearly that what enabled a genuinely partnership-centered model was not new processes, tools or templates, but a shift in mindset: from control to collaboration, from compliance to conversation. What mattered was not the *what* of procedures, but the *how* of engagement: attitude, behavior, and relational practice.

Across interviews, Oxfam staff described a conscious effort to move toward a more human, relational way of working with partners - one grounded in empathy, humility, and consistency. Communication practices were deliberately softened and made more personal. Several staff noted that even small gestures, such as adjusting the tone of an email or beginning a conversation with genuine interest in a partner's wellbeing, helped shift interactions from transactional to collaborative. As one staff member explained, before sending any communication, they would pause to ask themselves whether it *"was instructive or sounded like an equal conversation"* (KII Oxfam staff), a simple but powerful mindset that helped reframe relationships.

A constructive culture of accompaniment rather than enforcement was highlighted by many across functions: *"We don't scold partners when reporting errors happen. We discuss and fix it together"* (KII Oxfam staff). This mindset reflected a broader shift from compliance to collaboration, where mistakes were seen as opportunities for joint learning rather than grounds for sanction. The **same procedures** were applied, but with flexibility and empathy, better calibrated to each partner's capacity, experience, and comfort level.

Colleagues across Oxfam teams gradually developed what has been described as *exceptional soft skills for collaboration* becoming increasingly intentional in how they approached partners, paying attention to tone, timing, and communication style, and seeking guidance from the partnership team when needed to ensure interactions remained supportive rather than directive. Partners consistently

described Oxfam as *"the most comfortable and supportive partner"* (KII Partner) noting that focal points were approachable, patient, and never judgmental.

Informality was also used intentionally to reduce hierarchical distance. The use of more direct, accessible channels such as WhatsApp, and the choice to maintain an open, conversational tone, were seen as ways of breaking down the implicit barriers between "the INGO expert" and partner organizations. Staff emphasized that approaching partners with openness and vulnerability - rather than technical authority - created space for reciprocal honesty. Naming Oxfam's own limitations created space for partners to share theirs, transforming interactions into exchanges between equals and reinforcing mutual trust. As one staff member described, these small, human gestures could transform working relationships:

> **"When you call, you start with small talk - they are frontliners, they had a tough night - and that gives them relief ... You step out of the roles and focus on relationship building, and then some kind of magic happens. Things are done easier and quicker because the other human on the other side feels the relief and the lack of stress"** (KII Oxfam staff).

Partners echoed this view, describing the collaboration as a partnership *"in spirit, not only in words"* (KII Partner).

Partners also highlighted Oxfam's transparency, for example, openly sharing strategies, exit plans, and constraints during DD and partnership dialogues as a key factor that encouraged reciprocal openness and strengthened mutual accountability. Finally, visibility and physical presence were described as essential relational gestures. Staff made deliberate efforts to visit partners in person, particularly in moments of difficulty or sensitive communication, acknowledging their work and taking time to *"see the kitchen of their everyday work"* (KII Oxfam staff). Such moments were valued not only for what they conveyed symbolically (i.e., recognition, respect, and solidarity) but also for how they strengthened emotional connection and partnership cohesion. Overall, the **relational quality**, the way staff engaged with partners proved more influential in building equitable partnerships than any formal procedural innovation.[23]

4.2.3 Calibrating oxfam's support role

The transition to an exclusively service-to-partners model in the final phase of the response deepened a shift that had been underway since the outset. This phase demanded moving further away from a project management or implementer role toward one centered on facilitation, accompaniment, and enabling partners to lead. Staff reflected that this evolution involved learning to step back, listen, and identify where Oxfam could genuinely add value without taking over partners' space.

Oxfam staff described having space to test new approaches, make mistakes, and refine ways of working without fear of failure. Over time, this iterative learning process helped consolidate confidence in a support-based role - one focused on meaningful, tailored accompaniment rather than technical oversight or compliance management: *"That experience taught me that our role is not to cover everything, but to focus on meaningful support, tailored to partners' context"* (KII Oxfam staff).

4.2.4 Technical expertise and value addition

Oxfam's credibility with partners also rested on the quality of its technical support. Across interviews, partners consistently cited Oxfam's expertise particularly in MEAL, safeguarding, community-based protection, fundraising and advocacy as one of the most tangible sources of added value in the

partnership. As one partner reflected, the progress in their monitoring and reporting practices was the direct result of Oxfam's step-by-step accompaniment and *"patience in how they approached us"* (KII Partner). Partners also emphasized the role of Oxfam's advocacy and fundraising experts in amplifying their visibility and building strategic opportunities. One organization described Oxfam's support in this area simply as *"excellent - just brilliant"* (KII Partner).

A defining feature of Oxfam's technical approach was its **propositional but non-directive character**. Staff learned to offer options and ideas without imposing them - a subtle but significant shift in practice that reflected genuine respect for partners' autonomy. As one staff member noted, being "propositional" means ensuring partners are aware of possible avenues without taking decisions for them: if they do not know something is an option, they cannot ask for it. This balance between initiative and humility was repeatedly described as the essence of accompaniment: understanding when to act, when to suggest, and when simply to listen and let partners lead. Partners consistently perceived this as authentic:

> **"With Oxfam, it was never that they told us what to do; there was always genuine communication (...) Their comments and advice are valuable, constructive, and rooted in real understanding. Even in cases where they disagreed with our approach, the feedback was always beneficial for us - it helped us learn, see gaps, and improve"** (KII Partner).

4.2.5 Consistent and adaptative management culture

Leadership continuity and an adaptive, learning-oriented culture were repeatedly cited as critical enablers of the partnership-centered approach. Oxfam's leadership style was also described as intentional - taking time to reflect not only on what the organization does but how it does it. This reflective approach sometimes slowed decision-making but ensured alignment with LHL and partnership principles (see section 7). Across the team, this management style cultivated a genuine learning environment. Managers encouraged reflection, peer learning, and horizontal exchange across functions, helping staff build confidence in their evolving roles. Accountability was reframed to focus on outcomes rather than processes.

This culture did not emerge in isolation: it was both enabled by, and able to capitalize on, the unusually **strong financial base** from the Appeal and DEC funds, which gave the response *"a cushion that was unprecedented... we weren't under immediate pressure from financial constraints, and we could afford to maintain sufficient capacity and adapt the structure as needed"* (KII Oxfam staff). This stability and flexibility allowed multiple rounds of restructuring in a short period.

This internal culture directly shaped how Oxfam engaged externally: partners described feeling more confident, valued, and capable of asserting their own perspectives - noting that the collaboration:

> **"demonstrated partners' own capacity and now [we] can be bolder with other partners... Previously, we did not believe that our opinion or inputs mattered, but with Oxfam, through good communication and collaboration, now we are bolder"** (KII Partner).

4.3 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

4.3.1 Staffing and retention in a competitive market

Recruiting and retaining staff with the right profiles for the final, partnership-centered phase of the response proved a major challenge until March 2025 when the staffing situation stabilized.[24] The Ukrainian labor market is highly competitive, and Oxfam's short-term contracts - reflecting the planned phase-out - may have been one factor contributing to recruitment and retention challenges. Uncertainty surrounding the restructuring may also have played a role, with some staff leaving early or hesitating to commit to positions. As a result, continuity was frequently disrupted, and teams faced recurring gaps just as the partnership-support model required deeper, longer-term engagement.

Efforts to nationalize positions were well-intentioned but achieved mixed results. Oxfam aimed to strengthen national leadership and contextual ownership, yet in practice, a combination of factors – including those highlighted above may have contributed to situations where *"people left faster than they could be replaced"*(KII Oxfam staff). This turnover also limited the consolidation of Oxfam's partnership approach: while new staff were systematically inducted and given the necessary guidance, *"you can give them the partnership tip sheets and the policy... but that alone does not mainstream the approach"*(KII Oxfam staff). The limited number of Ukrainian staff within certain technical positions (MEAL, Finance, WASH, etc.) affected language capacity, contextual insight, and, in several cases, reportedly complicated communication and Oxfam's ability to provide timely and tailored support to partners.

4.3.2 Capacity to accompany partners

As Oxfam's role shifted fully toward accompaniment, Oxfam staff frequently noted that their **capacity was overstretched in relation to the number of partners**. This was partly caused by having to learn a new approach to supporting partners with the ISI while simultaneously kickstarting the WHLF. As several Oxfam staff described, the team simply had too many organizations to follow up with in depth: *"we have 18 partners between WHLF and ISI... it's just too much to properly support each one"*(KII Oxfam staff). This was further compounded by a perception that Oxfam staff were meant to offer similar levels of support to WHLF and strategic partners. While in the short-term this limits the ability to provide the kind of tailored, consistent support that the model requires, it would be expected that overtime, with more established ways of working, Oxfam staffing capacity may be adequate to offer the right support to partners.

The reduction of program positions happened relatively quickly,[25] and while not all staff viewed this as problematic, several noted that it weakened Oxfam's ability to offer technical or thematic accompaniment during a critical transition phase. At the time, some programs such as WASH were still under implementation, and the approach to program closure required maintaining technical oversight to ensure quality and learning continuity. This view was echoed by others who saw the early phasing out of technical functions, particularly in protection and WASH, as a missed opportunity. However, the decision was intentional with the aim to redirect resources from Oxfam's own technical capacity toward partners' institutional strengthening (Oxfam Ukraine Response, 2025).

4.3.3 Skills and expertise for rights-based partnership support

While Oxfam's teams have demonstrated strong commitment to inclusion and to supporting WLOs or organizations led by marginalized groups, several interviewees noted gaps in understanding how rights-based actors operate. Working with organizations driven by advocacy or social justice missions requires different forms of accompaniment than traditional humanitarian partnerships. As one informant noted, Oxfam staff did not always fully grasp *"how such organizations work and the time*

it takes to do rights-based programming" (KII Oxfam staff). Partners explained that these local and women-led group*s "are not NGOs in the classic sense"* (KII Partner). Their work is often slower-paced and deeply process-oriented, focused on influencing and empowerment rather than service delivery. This requires patience, flexibility, and a partnership approach that values progress in terms of impact as opposed to quick implementation. Some Oxfam staff reflected that the shift to this mindset is still ongoing. A few described how colleagues still defaulted to a "project-management mode," focusing on deadlines and deliverables rather than adaptive accompaniment - a habit gradually being unlearned as teams gain more confidence in relational forms of support. For more experienced humanitarian staff, this transition was particularly challenging. As one manager explained, many had spent decades in direct implementation settings and were now being asked *"to pause and rethink habitual ways of working - and that's a hard ask"* (KII Oxfam staff). Over time, however, deliberate reflection, peer learning, and closer collaboration with local actors have helped foster greater understanding of rights-based partnership dynamics and the pace required for sustainable change.

4.3.4 Uneven functional adaptation to partner-focused support

Service support functions have adapted their internal ways of working to enable others to work effectively through partnership. However, it has been more challenging for Oxfam to clearly articulate how service support functions can engage on the ISI to support partners and add value. Oxfam felt they struggled to clearly define their offers to partners with regards to service support functions and to adapt to partner-focused organizations strengthening support for these functions. This partly due to the dual role of internal compliance and accountability standards that these functions continue to have while trying to adapt to provide partner support. One role calls for a "working by the book" mindset while the other requires a much more relational set of skills and flexible ways of working mindset (see section 7.4.4). In addition, there were limited partner requests in the action plans with regards to service support functions such as operations management, financial management, administrative support, security, logistics and human resources. For example, while some partners expressed interest in using ISI for audits or financial staffing, their needs often revolved around more basic system improvements such as archiving, reporting, or compliance. As such, while these functions on paper should manage both an internal facing role and external support to partners, they have largely remained inward facing.

5. INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING OF PARTNERS

5. INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING OF PARTNERS

5.1 WHAT IS THE ISI AND HOW IT WORKS

The **Institutional Strengthening Initiative (ISI)** was established as a central pillar of Oxfam's responsible phase-out strategy in Ukraine, designed to move beyond short-term project funding and instead invest in the sustainability and leadership of a small group of long-standing partners. Each partner received an **€80,000 flexible grant** dedicated to institutional development, accompanied by intensive technical accompaniment across three main areas:

- Visibility and fundraising
- Advocacy and influence
- Systems and processes

Rather than prescribing organizational capacity assessments or predefined outputs, Oxfam intentionally adopted a trust-based and partner-driven model. Partners defined what "institutional strengthening" meant for their organizations, identified their own priorities, and developed **bespoke action plans** outlining how ISI resources would be used.

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF ISI ACTION PLANS BY THEMATIC AREA

Thematic Area	Example activities across partners	Partners (anonymized)
Organizational development and strategy	Developing/updating organizational strategies; reviewing policies; enterprise resource planning software/system upgrades; legal frameworks for social entrepreneurship	Partner 1, Partner 2, Partner 3, Partner 4, Partner 5
Fundraising and financial management	Donor mapping, fundraising training, proposal writing, external audits, accounting software	Partner 1, Partner 6, Partner 2, Partner 3, Partner 7, Partner 5
Advocacy and influence	Advocacy strategy, hiring advocacy staff, training, roundtables, donor/partner engagement, traveling	Partner 1, Partner 6, Partner 4, Partner 5
MEAL and data management	Monitoring and evaluation systems, database development, tools and templates, training staff	Partner 1, Partner 6, Partner 2, Partner 5
Gender, inclusion and safeguarding	Gender audits/policies, code of conduct development, safe programming, safeguarding focal points	Partner 1, Partner 6, Partner 2, Partner 4, Partner 5
Communications and visibility	Website updates, campaigns, branding, search engine optimization, media relations	Partner 1, Partner 6, Partner 2, Partner 4, Partner 5
Staff capacity and human resources	Seminars/workshops, recruitment of key staff, onboarding, performance management	Partner 1, Partner 6, Partner 7, Partner 5
Safety and security	Security audits, first aid training, internal policies, evacuation protocols	Partner 1, Partner 6, Partner 2, Partner 3, Partner 7, Partner 5
Wellbeing and psychosocial support	Staff retreats, supervision, psychosocial support, mental health support, team building	Partner 6, Partner 7, Partner 5

The ISI action plans show a strong emphasis on advocacy, fundraising, and organizational development, reflecting partners' priorities to diversify funding, gain visibility, and consolidate their institutional identity. Limited investment was directed toward program quality and coordination (see section 6). The ISI was intentionally not designed to fund program delivery, focusing instead on long-term organizational strengthening. Oxfam decided not to impose formal capacity assessments, recognizing that many partners had already completed such exercises for other donors and that requiring another would duplicate effort and potentially impose external standards. Instead, partners were trusted to define their own processes leading to their action plans.

The ISI's design drew on ongoing consultations with partners throughout 2024. Although partners did not directly co-design the mechanism, their feedback influenced its structure. The launch began with an all-partner workshop, followed by bilateral meetings in which Oxfam and each organization explored ambitions, challenges, and strategic visions. These conversations formed the foundation of the ISI action plans, which were finalized between February and May 2025. Each partner's grant was flexible in both scope and timing: minor budget shifts could be communicated without formal approval, and partners controlled their disbursement schedules. This flexibility allowed them to align investments with real-time organizational opportunities.

ISI implementation is coordinated through an internal organogram bringing together staff across fundraising (BDM), ACE, MEAL, gender, and partnerships. Bi-weekly coordination meetings, later streamlined into a smaller core group, ensure cross-functional alignment.

5.2 ENABLING CONDITIONS AND APPROACH TO THE ISI

From the outset, Oxfam's design choices centered on autonomy rather than prescription created a strong sense of ownership among partners. Action plans were not externally imposed but developed through in-person, reflective discussions where partners defined their own priorities and capacity gaps. Oxfam's teams travelled to each partner's office, engaging in open exchanges that helped tailor the support to each organization's specific context.

For many partners, the ISI represented a new kind of relationship - one that trusted them to set their own direction and make strategic decisions for their growth. Partners reported a *"real sense of confidence [...] Are you sure we can really do this? We can decide how to strengthen our own organization?"* rather than being locked into *"something like deliver 100 kits"* (KII Partner). This was both empowering and transformative. Action plans were treated as living documents, adapted when needed. This flexibility allowed partners to test new ideas, adjust focus areas, and refine priorities as they learned, ensuring that support remained relevant and meaningful over time.

Key to the ISI approach were:

- **Tailored and relationship-based accompaniment**: The ISI works well because it is deeply relational. Oxfam staff invests significant time in individual accompaniment, travelling to partners across Ukraine, holding bilateral discussions, and offering mentoring and coaching rather than predefined training. This proximity and regular contacts build trust, allow for better contextual understanding, and create conditions for honest dialogue about both challenges and progress.
- **Quarterly check-ins as reflective practice**: Quarterly check-ins play a key role in maintaining this dynamic. Rather than compliance exercises, they were framed as joint reflection sessions, focused on learning and forward planning. These moments of *"organic dialogue"* help partners assess their progress, revisit priorities, and identify where additional support or resources might be useful. They also improved coordination among Oxfam teams, ensuring coherence between different functions such as MEAL, communications, and partnerships. The adaptive nature of these exchanges enables both sides to stay flexible and responsive to changing needs, reinforcing the ISI's learning-oriented spirit.

- **Adaptive reporting**: Another critical enabler was the adapted reporting model, which replaced rigid templates with collaborative tools like the Joint Reflection and Monitoring Document. Instead of formal reports, partners and Oxfam co-document progress during discussions (check-ins) or through written submissions in formats that best suit each organization. This approach – while still demanding - allows reflection to stay at the center of the process and strengthens partners' ownership of learning and accountability. The ability to adapt and give partners options for how they interact with Oxfam whether through conversation-based updates, written summaries, or shared notes was consistently cited by both Oxfam and partners as a defining success factor.

5.3 POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR PARTNERS

5.3.1 Fundraising and resource diversification

Fundraising and resource diversification emerged as the most visible and celebrated outcome of ISI support and, logically, the most demanded and prioritized from partners. It addressed a long-standing need among Ukrainian CSOs to move beyond project delivery and develop stronger, more sustainable funding bases.

Oxfam's fundraising support was consistently described by both staff and partners as structured, relevant, and highly tailored. Rather than focusing on generic donor mapping or proposal review, Oxfam invested in a comprehensive and adaptive approach that combined technical guidance, mentoring, and strategic positioning. The support extended across the full fundraising cycle helping organizations to refine their fundraising and partnership strategies, analyze donor landscapes, strengthen internal systems for compliance and DD, and prepare for engagement with institutional donors. In practice, this takes the form of one-on-one coaching on proposal writing and budgeting, mock donor interviews, or reviewing of concept notes and strategies. It also includes targeted introductions, visibility opportunities, and participation in international fora, enabling partners to position themselves as credible and trusted actors.

This investment produced **tangible results.** Several partners secured new funding opportunities and expanded their networks. While this cannot be fully attributed to the ISI engagement, partners commented that they felt it contributed to these opportunities and outcomes. For example, PHK used ISI travel funds to develop and submit two new proposals. Rokada was introduced to War Child for the SHARP consortium and later joined a broader IMC partnership supported by a recommendation letter from Oxfam. With the financial support that enabled them to hire a dedicated fundraiser, Voice of Romni strengthened their ability to systematically approach donors and manage proposal processes. They are now in the process of becoming a sub-partner of Save the Children for the FCDO SHARP call, have joined new consortia on humanitarian access and women's rights, and have successfully secured a grant from the Embassy of Canada. A partner reflected, *"we really achieved a lot already. Honestly, without the ISI we would not have been able to do all this."* WCU also secured national-level funding from the Ukrainian Women's Fund, directly building on the fundraising tools and coaching they received under the ISI.

Crucially, these fundraising successes were underpinned by system and process strengthening. Several partners used ISI resources to enhance their internal systems, ensuring **donor readiness and compliance**. For example, PHK invested in data protection and information management systems, enabling it to apply for direct UHF funding. WCU prioritized catching up on financial and safeguarding procedures, while peer-to-peer exchanges between partners supported shared learning on DD and compliance practices. As one partner organization described, *"We have established firmly certain processes, revised procedures and work standards. Now we can apply for other grants."* This reflects how ISI investments not only enabled access to funding but also built the institutional infrastructure to **sustain it.**

The ISI also contributed significantly to increasing partners' visibility and credibility. Oxfam's **brokering role** opened doors for national and international exposure, allowing partners to engage in high-level spaces that had previously been inaccessible. For example, PHK represented Ukrainian civil society at the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week in Geneva, the Reconstruction Forum in Brussels, and was invited to speak at Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development conference 2025. Similarly, VoR's participation in the Commission on the Status of Women led to meetings with major donors such as CARE and the German Federal Foreign Office, as well as an invitation to the Clinton Global Initiative. Such exposure strengthened their reputation within donor and civil society networks, enhancing both credibility and long-term sustainability.

The process also reinforced the value of accompaniment over training demonstrating that when technical and relational support go hand in hand, partner organizations are better equipped to sustain themselves and lead within the humanitarian and development ecosystem.

5.3.2 Advocacy, communications and visibility

Another key area of success under the ISI has been the strengthening of advocacy as a central function within partner organizations. For some partners, this represented a major shift in how they understood their mission and influence within Ukrainian civil society. As one partner noted, *"Funding matters, but for me this was about much more than money - it was about recognition of advocacy as a central part of our work"* (KII Partner). Through ISI investments, several partners were able to move from ad hoc advocacy initiatives toward structured and strategic engagement. Some developed or refined advocacy strategies, while others created new staff positions or designated focal points to lead policy and representation work. One organization, for example, recruited an advocacy coordinator in Kyiv, which enabled its participation in national-level coordination mechanisms and decision-making spaces for the first time: *"We were not able to participate meaningfully or be represented in Kyiv before... Now we are"* (KII Partner).

Collective advocacy and networking also gained traction. Rokada's membership in the Alliance for Ukrainian CSOs strengthened its influence through joint appeals to national authorities on disability rights, while other partners began playing a more active role in sectoral and thematic platforms. As one Oxfam staff member reflected, *"All our partners are now members of the NGO platform, and many are engaging in networks and coordination spaces in ways they were not before"* (KII Oxfam staff).

The ISI's investment in networking and participation in national and international fora further amplified partners' visibility and credibility as actors in the humanitarian sector representing Ukrainian civil society nationally and abroad. Oxfam's brokering role was critical in this process. By leveraging its networks and reputation, Oxfam created access points that partners would otherwise have struggled to reach. As one partner explained, *"Without those connections, doors often remain closed - not because of lack of capacity, but because no one knows how to open them"* (KII Partner).

In parallel, partners highlighted the value of communications support - a cross-cutting enabler of both advocacy and fundraising impact. Oxfam developed a communications library and a menu of training and advisory options. Some partners, with the support of Oxfam, revamped their websites, improved their online visibility, adopted more ethical storytelling approaches, and professionalized their public image. This investment helped ensure that advocacy efforts were both strategically positioned and responsibly communicated.

5.3.3 Organizational strengthening, wellbeing and staff enablement

The ISI is playing a pivotal role in strengthening partners' internal systems, enabling reflection, and investing in the people and structures that underpin organizational resilience. Beyond its financial value, partners consistently described ISI as a catalyst for **transformation** - shifting from reactive delivery to strategic consolidation, from "survival mode" to sustainability thinking.

The ISI helps build capacity and drive organizational transformation. The ISI funding enabled the recruitment of dedicated staff or consultants in areas that had long remained underdeveloped due to operational pressures particularly fundraising, advocacy, and MEAL. One partner organization noted that the hiring of a fundraising specialist finally allowed them to develop systematic donor mapping, proposal pipelines, and visibility strategies that had previously been handled ad hoc by an overstretched director. Another described how its newly appointed advocacy focal point established a consistent voice in national coordination spaces. For others, the addition of MEAL staff laid the foundations for evidence systems that now underpin both accountability and fundraising. This dedicated capacity not only strengthened technical functions but also fostered organizational confidence and professionalism.

Partners repeatedly described the ISI as a rare opportunity to step back from emergency response and invest in self-assessment, visioning, and cultural change. One partner characterized it as *"a kind of transformation - a reassessment of our work, of who we are, where we are"* (KII Partner). Several partner organizations used ISI resources to update or develop organizational strategies, clarify governance priorities, and articulate their long-term value proposition. One partner organization, for instance, observed that the ISI *"is contributing to a more open, adaptive, and learning-focused organizational culture."* Similarly, another partner described how discussions around the ISI helped leadership reflect on the need to *"fix the car, not just the road"*- a metaphor for balancing urgent delivery with sustainable planning. These moments of reflection reshaped how partners conceptualized **sustainability** - no longer limited to financial survival, but understood as the ability to adapt, care for staff, and evolve as learning organizations: *"We're really digging deep and making organizational changes - not just filling the gaps we see on the surface but finding the real problems and fixing them... the impact will be huge"* (KII Partner).

Risk management and staff wellbeing are seen as enablers of resilience. A notable evolution under ISI has been the growing attention to staff wellbeing, safety and security, and organizational risk management as integral dimensions of institutional strength. Some partner organizations incorporated psychosocial support and risk preparedness into their ISI plans. For example, one partner's staff retreat for 50 employees was described as *"vital for strategic planning, strengthening relationships, informal communication, and supporting staff wellbeing,"* while another partner organized its own retreat explicitly to address burnout. Others invested in safety protocols and psychological support for staff working close to frontlines, or in risk management frameworks and training - recognizing that institutional resilience depends as much on human resilience as on systems and contributing to a more systematic approach to duty of care.

Even smaller initiatives such as funding English language courses proved highly enabling. In one organization, only the director spoke English, forcing her to attend every donor meeting and manage all external communication. With language training, responsibilities will be shared, freeing leadership bandwidth for strategic oversight.

Rebalancing financial and non-financial support is a key learning from the ISI. Across all interviews, partners underscored that the ISI's true added value lay not only in its flexible funding, but in the quality of accompaniment and trust-based collaboration that came with it. As one partner put it, *"Finance is important, but it's not even the most important thing - a lot of things that should be done require low or no funding"* (KII Partner). Partners highlighted that what made the ISI distinctive was its balance: 'modest' financial inputs combined with sustained relational support, mentoring, and reflective dialogue. **Non-financial support**, when well-timed and tailored, multiplies the impact of financial assistance, creating the conditions for more sustainable and meaningful organizational change.

Importantly, several partners have begun referencing ISI when engaging with other donors as an example of good practice in localization and capacity strengthening. As one explained, *"I often use the ISI as an example when speaking to other donors. I say: 'Look, this is how Oxfam is supporting us with institutional funding and capacity development'"* (KII Partner).

5.4 OUTCOMES OF ISI FOR OXFAM

The ISI program is not only strengthening partners. It is also serving as a learning laboratory for Oxfam staff, deepening their understanding of what effective accompaniment means in the Ukrainian context. Staff described a process of ongoing reflection and adaptation, recognizing that institutional strengthening required as much introspection from Oxfam as from partner organizations. ISI created space for **double-loop learning**: staff not only examined what they did, but also *how* and *why* they did it. Team members demonstrated a high degree of self-awareness, frequently questioning how to balance proactive support with respect for partner ownership*: "There are moments when I feel like I can't quite get in - maybe they're not as responsive or not ready for that kind of support - and I've learned that it's important not to push."* This reflective posture - asking whether non-financial support that partners did not take up was simply "not the right one" or "not offered at the right time"- marked a deliberate shift from a supply-driven model ("we have tools and services to offer") toward a demand-led approach grounded in patience, dialogue, and partner readiness.

Staff learned that tailoring is fundamentally relational not technical. Finding the right priority for each partner requires sustained dialogue, flexibility, and the ability to read between the lines, listening not just to what partners said but also looking at what they needed at each stage. This approach also demands stronger internal coordination across functions - aligning business development, advocacy, MEAL, and partnership teams to ensure that offers of support are coherent and complementary. Fundraising, for example, became an entry point for MEAL, visibility, advocacy, and compliance teams to connect their inputs, leading to improved integration.

Staff also recognized that genuine progress in institutional strengthening could not be measured through linear milestones or pre-defined deliverables, but rather *"a process of dialogue, not something you benchmark in terms of milestones - building up a relationship of trust and exchange"* (KII Oxfam staff). This shift marked a move toward a process-oriented practice where the quality of dialogue itself becomes both a means and a measure of success.

5.5 WHAT HAS NOT WORKED WELL AND WHY

5.5.1 Capacity and time constraints

While the ISI model proved conceptually strong, its implementation faced practical limitations linked to **time and capacity**. Staff noted that providing meaningful, individualized support requires significant time for relationship-building, follow-up, and reflection - resources that were increasingly stretched within a small team.

Institutional strengthening is, by nature, a long-term process, yet the **ISI's timeline is short**. Several respondents emphasized that both Oxfam and partners needed more time to translate action plans into sustained organizational change: *"Phase-out is also a challenge because of limited time. There's pressure to follow through on plans, but institutional strengthening is complex"* (KII Oxfam staff). Beyond workload, Oxfam staff also needed time to shift their own mindsets. Moving to an approach centered on relationship-building and partner ownership requires continuous reflection and dialogue. Staff even described holding what they call internal *"therapy sessions"* to collectively unpack what the ISI means in practice and how to adapt their ways of working to it.

This internal shift is made more difficult by the absence of clear guidance or comparable models within Oxfam. The Ukraine response was the first to pilot a planned phase-out rather than an exit driven by external factors (e.g., dwindling funding), meaning teams had no frameworks to draw on. As a result, much of the ISI's implementation relied on experimentation and improvisation - valuable for learning but demanding in terms of time and staff energy.

5.5.2 Balancing autonomy, technical depth and internal coherence

From the outset, Oxfam had a clear vision of the range of non-financial support partners might require, reflected in an organogram that included functions such as fundraising, ACE, MEAL, gender and inclusion and partnerships.[26] However, most partners prioritized fundraising above all else, with only advocacy-oriented organizations expressing stronger interest in influencing work. This strong emphasis on fundraising at times left Oxfam teams unsure how much to assert their thematic offer versus waiting for partners to define their demand, especially when emphasizing partner leadership and being mindful on imposing own preferences or a sense of priorities. Oxfam teams face some tension between respecting partner ownership and maintaining strategic oversight. Staff described moments of internal reflection on how to act as a "critical friend": supportive but not directive, flexible yet accountable.

These dynamics were compounded by **internal tensions within Oxfam itself**. Different teams interpreted ISI's objectives through their own lenses - programmatic, operational, or business development. Some staff perceived the process as "skewed," with partners responding to the agendas set by particular Oxfam teams rather than through a fully integrated dialogue. Others described a sense of professional insecurity: *"Sometimes there is this human fear - if they do not pick up on my subject matter, why am I here?"* (KII Oxfam staff).

The decision not to require a formal capacity assessment was consistent with ISI's LHL principles but also partly driven by Oxfam's own internal capacity limitations. However, the absence of a structured diagnostic tool meant that opportunities to connect capacity development in fundraising or advocacy with improvements in other areas, such as program quality may have been missed. An intentional approach to exploring these areas collaboratively without defaulting to traditional INGO-driven assessments is possible.[27] It would recognize that organizational capacity strengthening is complex and that both INGOs and partner organizations may have blind spots ('you don't know what you don't know'). This could have supported a more rounded understanding of needs and priorities.

The lack of program quality focus in the ISI is linked to a broader missed opportunity around program quality from the start of the response (see section 6). Oxfam had technical capacity from the start of the partnership-centered response that was here to support partners with program quality. However, Oxfam struggled to translate program quality into a joint responsibility between Oxfam and partners. While technical capacity existed within the response, Oxfam never found an intentional and thoughtful approach to what supporting program quality and outcomes means in a partner-centric response model. As a result, sharing of technical know-how and joint work on program quality and outcomes was ad hoc during the first phase of the response, and therefore failed to translate adequately into the ISI. A more joint and intentional approach to program quality should have been embedded from the outset of the partnership-centered response, which would have led to a more organic inclusion of program quality into the ISI. Some cautioned, *"We need to ensure that the quality of what they deliver remains strong, not just that the organization survives"* (KII Oxfam staff).

5.5.3 Internal coordination and process challenges

The early phase of ISI implementation was marked by internal coordination challenges within Oxfam teams. Because the initiative required collaboration across multiple functions - fundraising, advocacy, gender, MEAL, and partnerships - aligning approaches and expectations proved difficult: *"the challenges with the ISI are really not about the work with partners, but about how we functioned as a team"* (KII Oxfam staff). Some Oxfam colleagues were initially only loosely connected to the ISI process and did not fully understand its objectives. This limited early ownership and delayed cross-team engagement. Coordination gradually improved over time, supported by regular check-ins and dedicated internal discussions, but several respondents acknowledged that these mechanisms would have been more effective if established earlier.

Staff reflected that, in the early stages, check-ins could sometimes drift back toward traditional monitoring, focusing on whether planned actions had been completed rather than on reflection and adaptation. This tendency was also initially mirrored in partner practice, with several treating their ISI action plan as a reporting template rather than a living, strategic document.

The flexible and adaptive nature of ISI also makes monitoring and impact measurement difficult, particularly for MEAL staff. Each Oxfam department tracks its own contributions, resulting in a fragmented overall picture of progress. Because partners' action plans evolve continuously, with changing priorities and pacing, standard monitoring frameworks prove ill-suited. This makes it difficult for team members - particularly MEAL department - to quantify progress or attribute impact in conventional ways. As one staff member explained, they were *"still struggling with the MEAL element - how to judge my contribution, especially since so much of my role is about capacity sharing, being adaptive, and working differently with each partner, and I don't yet have a good way to measure that effectively"* (KII Oxfam staff).

Flexibility also brought practical challenges for partners, particularly in financial reporting. Finance staff frequently found it difficult to track expenditures or map activities against the ISI budget, since its breakdown differed significantly from traditional project structures. Several partners reported being "lost in activities" and requested repeated clarification meetings with Oxfam's finance team. In addition, some partner organizations worried about how future audits or compliance reviews might interpret their choices. As one partner put it, flexibility was welcome, but *"sometimes specifics are important… there is always this fear that questions will arise later because we simply did not clarify it, and they did not tell us"* (KII Partner).

5.4.4 Timing and sequencing of ISI support

The ISI was conceived as a core element of Oxfam's phase-out strategy in Ukraine, designed to ensure that key strategic partners were equipped with the organizational support and resources to continue delivering assistance and pursuing their missions after Oxfam's exit. However, positioning the ISI primarily as an exit-related intervention limited its potential to drive deeper and more paced organizational strengthening. In retrospect, several staff viewed this as a missed opportunity to embed institutional strengthening earlier and more strategically within the response. Earlier initiation would have enabled partners to strengthen systems and practices in parallel with program delivery, rather than after more than two years of operational 'pressure'. In particular, key areas such as financial management, safeguarding, logistics, procurement, and program quality could have benefited from gradual and iterative engagement, supported by joint learning over time. As one staff member put it, *"ISI at the end in Ukraine could have been done quicker; we struggled internally with plans and people pushing for their plan"* (KII Oxfam staff). Some suggested that existing processes - particularly partner DD - could have been leveraged earlier as entry points for capacity discussions, helping to identify priorities for strengthening systems and processes in real time. Embedding organizational development at that stage would have allowed partners to address potentially donor compliance, finance, and safeguarding gaps proactively, enhancing their fundraising readiness. The late timing also inadvertently reinforces the perception by Oxfam staff of ISI as a *"project to wrap up before exit"* (KII Oxfam staff), rather than a strategic, embedded capacity-development initiative.

6. PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

6. PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The learning review did not conduct an evaluation of partners' performance in terms of program implementation, outcomes and impact. However, the learning review aimed to shed some light on what the partnership-centered response achieved in terms of program implementation, outcomes and impact. Equally, it aimed to understand the limitations and challenges of adopting a partnership-centered response for program outcomes.

This section builds on the perceptions of program participants (people who benefited from interventions), partner organizations and Oxfam staff member. However, as outlined in the introductions, the learning review faced some limitations. Partner organizations and Oxfam staff members offered generic perceptions of program quality with few engaging deeply on how programs met existing sectoral and sector-wide standards.

6.1 THE ADDED VALUE OF THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE ON PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The survey shows that partners and Oxfam both recognize that the partnership-centered response was better able to meet community needs, increased inclusivity of hard to reach and marginalized populations groups and had greater agility and adaptability to changing context and needs (see Figure 3). While partners felt the partnership-centered response achieved scale (ranked as the second highest achievement), Oxfam staff ranked scale as one of the lowest achievements and the main limitation. This reflects the distinct viewpoints of each stakeholder group. Partner organizations look at their organizations' ability to meet the needs they see at scale where they are. Partners' perceptions also reflect that many of these organizations experienced growth in the last few years. Oxfam staff members look at scale in comparison to historical responses led by Oxfam.

FIGURE 3: WHAT DID THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE ALLOW OXFAM AND PARTNERS TO ACHIEVE?
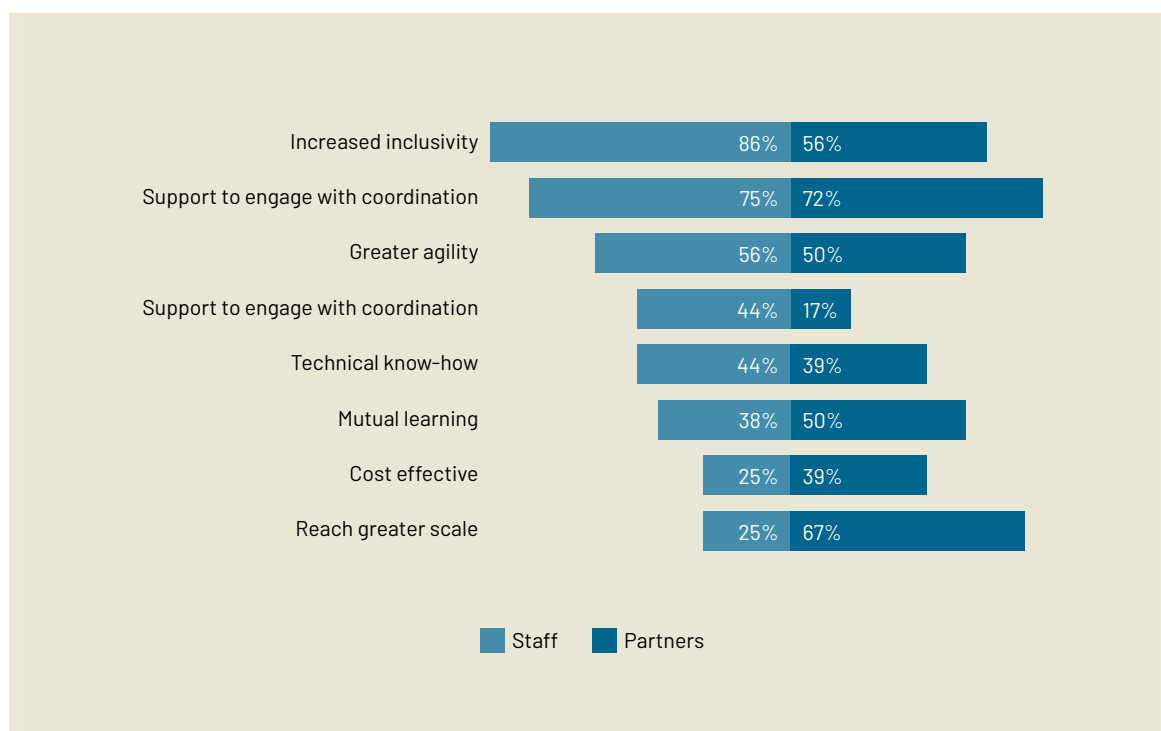
Source: Learning review survey

6.1.1 Relevant and adaptive to changing needs

The partnership-centered response has demonstrated it leads to a more relevant response. The ways of partnering based on trust, flexibility and local leadership enabled programs that were in line with community priorities, which were agile, reactive and adaptive to changing needs and context. Feedback from FGDs consistently reiterated this. The approach allowed a real leadership in program design from partners enabling them to implement the programs they felt best fitted the needs of communities. Partners recognized their added value in understanding needs, identifying priority needs and ensuring that interventions are relevant to needs. As one partner explained, their knowledge of the culture and the context as well as their proximity to communities allowed them to get a better understanding of needs:

> "I think that it would be difficult for Oxfam without us, without field people, in oblasts, regions, villages, communities to work with communities themselves, to reach the heads of villages, to talk to them honestly, to talk to them openly, to talk to them in their language and tone" (KII Partner).

An Oxfam staff gave another example where one partner organization was recognized for tailoring support to specific needs, carefully considering which package of interventions would be the most impactful for program participants.

While partners capacities and approach contributed the most to this outcome, flexibility, tailoring and adaptability to specific and changing needs in the partnership-centered response were facilitated by Oxfam's ways of partnering.[28] In particular, Oxfam's approach to have partners design their program of interventions meant partner organizations had the freedom to design relevant programs. Oxfam's budgeting and project management flexibility also meant partners could shift and change their program focus and adapt their budgets accordingly.

The trust partners received was also used by some partners organizations to test, innovate and find ways to respond to needs more appropriately. One partner highlighted there were able to increase their community grants from $2,000 to $10,000 leading to greater impact of community led responses. This experience was then used for this partner to increase the grant for all their partnership as well as led to other organizations following this example. By offering a space to innovate, the partnership-centered response led to a wider impact beyond Oxfam and its partners.

6.1.2 Timely once fully set up and reactive to new emergencies and needs

Program participants noted that partners provided assistance and services in a timely manner but also were quick to respond after severe shelling incidents. The response to the Kakhovka dam was given as an example by multiple Oxfam staff members highlighting that partners were responding within 24 hours of the disaster. Generally, the partnership-centered response was described as agile, able to quickly identify and take on opportunities and achieve results. Partners also highlighted that this was enabled by quick decisions and light processes from Oxfam when program focus and budget needed to shift. Partners were able to take full advantage of this because they had the capacity to move fast and were operationally agile. As one partner highlighted:

"Many times we had to go through re-approval when we needed to spend the budget or use leftover funds by a certain date. We would get on a call, discuss it, propose where to reallocate the funds, back it up with justifications, and then use the budget for that new purpose—even if it was not originally planned for that. They always accepted our proposals" (KII Partner).

Another example given was that of a partner rebuilding a dilapidated community center, highlighting the partner was able to finalize the work in around four months, a time estimated to be much shorter than if Oxfam had taken on the same project. This was highlighted as an example where Oxfam's own internal processes can affect timeliness and reactivity especially around procurement. Partner organizations on the other hand had developed internal processes that were nimbler compared to that of Oxfam. The first learning review highlighted the delay in responding initially due to the time required to set up partnerships (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam International, 2024). However, once the partnerships were set up, the partnership-centered response was able to intervene at speed and with agility.

6.1.3 Able to reach remote populations and inclusive of diverse groups

By working with rights-based organizations and organizations run by and for marginalized population groups (e.g., WROs, Roma organizations, LGBTQIA+ organizations), the partnership-centered response had a much more nuanced understanding of who was vulnerable, who could access generic assistance and who was isolated or socially marginalized. This enabled the partnership-centered response to reach the right people in the right way and the most vulnerable people. Inclusive responses require specialized knowledge on how best to work with specific communities but also requires existing relationships and trust which Oxfam could not have built in a short time.

Program participants from the Roma community described how the partner organization is like "their" organization, highlighting they do not approach other NGOs for fear of being rejected. Program participants from the LGBTQIA+ community also highlighted that receiving assistance and services from an LGBTQIA+ organization felt safe and provided a sense of security highlighting that non-affirming organizations may not be friendly. Program participants from the Roma community and from the LGBTQIA+ community shared they had negative experiences with other organizations not run by people from their communities including judgement, pressure, rejection and discrimination:

"It is nice to receive help from a Roma organization. At the beginning of the war, we often heard from other organizations: 'This help is only for Ukrainians.' and we stopped going there" (Woman FGD participant).

Women assisted by a WRO with business development support also highlighted that they felt safer and more comfortable receiving such support from a WRO as the support was more tailored to how women conduct business.

"When you visit other women [participants] and see that everyone is working, it gives you support, that it is important that we are women and that they give us support, and you gain confidence that we will succeed" (Woman FGD participant).

The partnership-centered response was also able to reach populations that were geographically hard to reach due to insecurity or due to their rural nature. This also included reaching areas where needs

were high but were underfunded such as populations living in the Western part of Ukraine. As one Oxfam staff highlighted the response focused on:

> "[…] particularly vulnerable communities and those in very dangerous situations where Oxfam's own presence could not be established. Some of our partners have operated in areas that were previously occupied by Russian forces. In those situations, it was extremely difficult for Oxfam to respond directly because we were not present (…) Without the partners able to operate under those conditions, those communities would have been left on their own" (KII Oxfam staff).

Partners also pushed Oxfam to include specific categories of individuals missed in the response such as foreigners without documentation or foreign students with expired visas. Humanitarian responses struggle with inclusion and ensuring no one is left behind by the response (see Lough et al., 2022). By giving partners the leadership to design their program, expand the understanding of vulnerability and therefore who should be targeted with assistance and services, the partnership-centered response played a niche, yet significant role in prioritizing inclusion and reach. As one Oxfam staff members highlights: *"If we had implemented the projects directly, […] we would not have reached the same populations or identified the real needs in those communities"* (KII Oxfam staff).

The humanitarian sector has also struggled with its approach to vulnerability analysis and targeting (see for instance Levine et al., 2025). As one partner highlighted, humanitarian vulnerability criteria often fail to understand the role of social isolation in creating specific vulnerabilities. This was particularly critical for certain population groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals. The partnership-centered response pushed the boundaries of traditional practice and adopted better vulnerability analysis and targeting as a result. Other examples include one partner pushing Oxfam to change its practice on using binary sex disaggregation in their MEAL reporting; and Oxfam supporting another partner to use the Washington Group Short Set on functioning[29] to target people living with disabilities. In this last example, the partner had highlighted that many people living with disabilities lacked a national disability certificate. Such documentation is usually required by other international organizations during targeting leading to the exclusion of people living with disabilities who lack documentation due to the challenges associated with the disability certification process in Ukraine. Oxfam, because of its ways of partnering and a principle of finding solutions in collaboration with partners, produced the alternative of using the Washington Group questions which was seen by the partner as a more effective way to ensure the inclusion of people living with disabilities. This displays again the positive impact on program outcomes of having partners' leadership on design and adaptation of the response and Oxfam's joint problem-solving approach.

The partnership-centered response coupled inclusive programming with advocacy towards the wider humanitarian response. Research reports published by Oxfam highlighted the challenges specific population groups face in accessing services and assistance and how the needs of these groups were still being missed by the broader humanitarian response (Greener, 2024; Padmini, 2023).

6.1.4 Enabled interventions that nobody else was willing to fund

The partnership-centered response led to a strong focus on protection programs. This was not only in line with the needs of the population but also facilitated by working with a number of rights-based organizations. The partnership-centered response was also better able to implement protection programs because of their proximity to communities and individuals as well as their relationship of trust with communities.

Partners reported that Oxfam enabled them to continue parts of their work that no other donor or organization was willing to fund.[30] In doing so, the partnership-centered response allowed organizations to truly shape the response and fill gaps left by the wider humanitarian response. One organization highlighted that Oxfam supported their work on advocacy when no other donors was willing to do so. Another organization highlighted that they were able to support geriatric departments because *'Oxfam took the courage to support this and we made repairs there and took [adult incontinence products] there'* (KII Partner). Another partner gave the example of Oxfam supporting them renovate a building so it could be used as a hub for IDPs from Kherson.

6.2 THE TRADE-OFFS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE ON PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

### 6.2.1 Perceived as too fragmented and limited in scale

Many respondents felt that there were no trade-offs or limitations in the partnership-centered response on program outcomes and impact. When highlighted, the main limitation was the low scale of the response. This was stressed by Oxfam staff and not by partner organizations (as highlighted in the survey results). The challenge of scale came in two forms: the fragmented nature of the response and the number of people reached.

The partnership-centered response was described by some Oxfam staff as fragmented and a patchwork of programs. By having partners design programs, the partnership-centered response was unable to make more than the sum of its parts: each partners' program and intervention stood in isolation from the other. This was noted as a challenge also for Oxfam's advocacy work and strategy which as a result was not partnership-centered (because it would have been too fragmented) but partner-informed. It is unclear what impact this fragmentation had on the outcomes for people affected by the full-scale invasion as they were no evidence from the FGDs.

The number of people reached were comparatively not as high as in other Oxfam's response and not in line with Oxfam's internal commitments and expectations (Oxfam International, 2025b).[31] In 2024, Oxfam partnership-centered response in Ukraine reached 0.5 million people or 3.5% of needs (as per the estimated 14.6 million people in need estimated by the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (OCHA, 2025)). Between January 2022 and September 2025, Oxfam estimates it has reached 844,085 people in Ukraine through their direct implementation (54.70% of overall reach) while partner organizations reached 699,118 people in their partnership with Oxfam (45.30% of overall reach). As the years went on, Oxfam's direct implementation reduced and partner organizations in Ukraine increased their scale reaching an initial 10,000 people in 2022, more than 100,000 in 2023 to almost 500,000 in 2024 (see Figure 4).[32] While it took time, partner organizations were able to increase their scale over time. As one Oxfam staff explains, the partnership-centered response was able to achieve both inclusion and adequate reach:

> "Even so, the partnership-centered approach allowed us to meet expectations while maintaining a focus on marginalized populations. And while there can be tension about whether this meets broader humanitarian benchmarks, the context in Ukraine meant that the local actor network was strong enough to ensure both inclusion and adequate reach" (KII Oxfam staff).

FIGURE 4: NUMBER OF PEOPLE REACHED WITH THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE IN UKRAINE DISAGGREGATED BY YEAR AND BY OXFAM AND PARTNERS
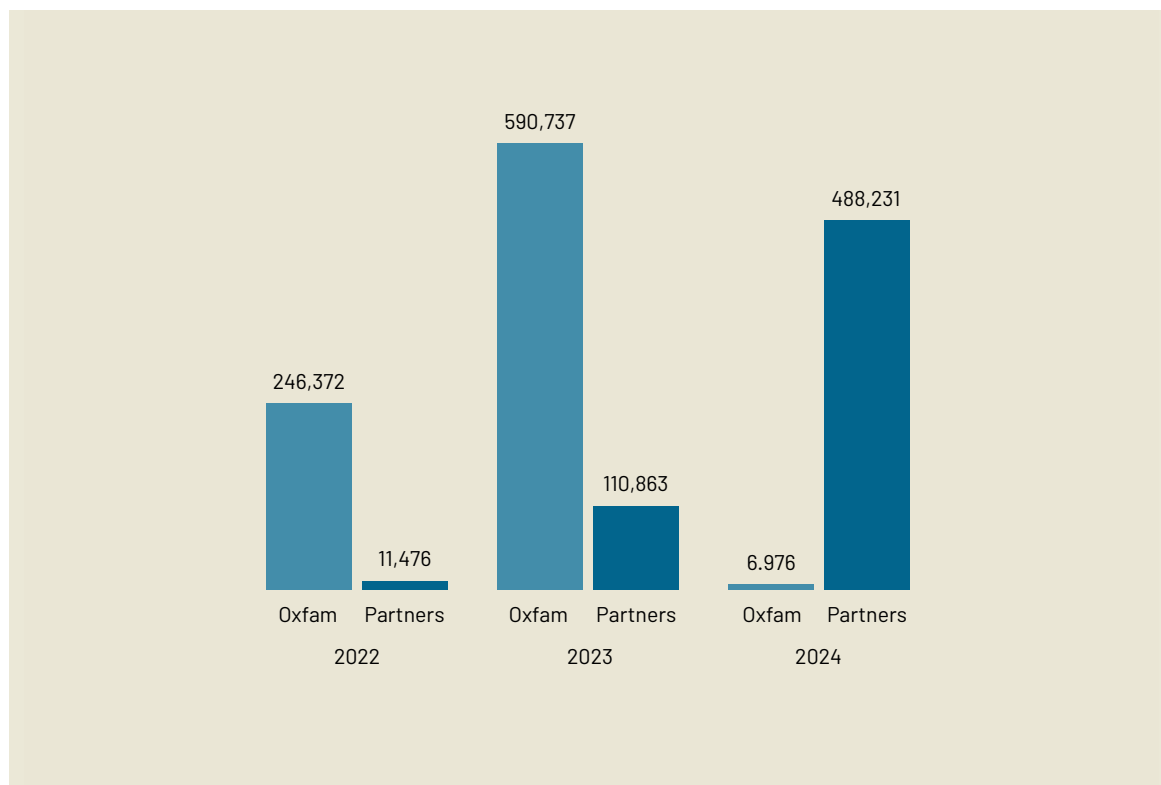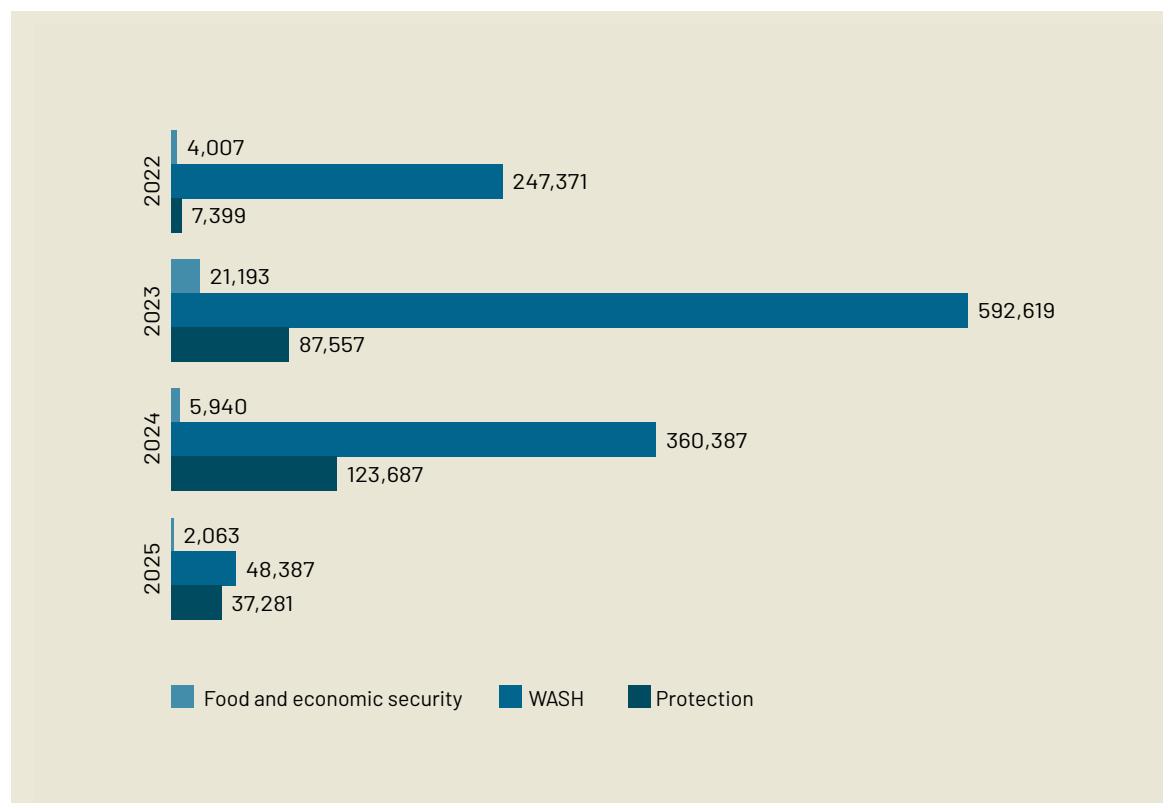

Source: Oxfam's MEAL dashboard

Oxfam staff reflected on the importance of scale and timeliness in particular for WASH programming to avoid the risk of epidemics. Oxfam balanced this requirement through direct implementation initially, while working with partners within their own capacities including absorption capacities:

> "Scale was smaller and not exactly how one might ideally implement interventions. On the WASH side, projects were small, so we had to adapt to the level partners were able to manage and spend (...) Partners' absorption capacity was limited, so the projects were intentionally not very large" (KII Oxfam staff).

The scale of the partnership-centered response was also a factor of the sectoral focus of the response. Scale tends to be associated with certain types of programs such as WASH, cash distribution or food distribution. The partnership-centered response has focused significantly on protection programs and, in more recent years, on support to economic recovery (see Figure 9). Whether led by Oxfam or partners, such programs tend to have a lower reach due to the nature of the interventions.

FIGURE 5: NUMBER OF PEOPLE REACHED BY SECTOR

2022
4,007
247,371
7,399

2023
21,193
592,619
87,557

2024
5,940
360,387
123,687

2025
2,063
48,387
37,281

Food and economic security ■ WASH ■ Protection

Source: Oxfam's MEAL dashboard

The question of scale as a limitation must be considered in light of the overall humanitarian response. In Ukraine, a well-funded and well-capacitated humanitarian response, the partnership-centered response focusing on quality over quantity, on reaching the most vulnerable rather than reaching the highest number of people is acting in complementarity with other humanitarian responders. Oxfam positioned itself to support a response to niche issues and a specific gap in the wider humanitarian response by focusing on protection and working with organizations run by and for marginalized population groups. This raised questions amongst Oxfam staff on how quality is measured and whether that is by scale or depth. Oxfam staff also saw the complementarity of Oxfam's approach, as one Oxfam staff explains:

> "The question of scale versus inclusion is always contextual. The added value of a partnership-centered approach is not about maximizing numbers universally — it is about determining where Oxfam's expertise, mandate, and resources can complement others, reaching populations that might otherwise be left behind. That is why, in Ukraine, the balance worked well: large organizations could deliver at scale, while smaller partners ensured coverage for marginalized groups" (KII Oxfam staff).

6.2.2 Lacked visibility on program outcomes and impact

The learning review did not find any instances of significant issues with program quality, safeguarding or accountability to affected people. There were monitoring activities in place such as narrative

reports from Oxfam, monitoring visits done by Oxfam staff and partner organizations systematically did post-distribution monitoring and had feedback mechanisms in place. However, the learning review found there was limited visibility on partner organizations' program outcomes and impact beyond partner organizations' own reporting. While the learning review interviewed a greater number of non-program staff, it noted that the knowledge of program quality was limited with some Oxfam staff feeling there were challenges with engaging on program quality and sectoral standards. The learning review received limited feedback on the partnership-centered response ability to meet sectoral standards. While not all standards make sense in Ukraine (and in other context for that matter), it demonstrated less intentionality to pro-actively integrate elements of program quality in the overall response and the partnership approach.

The partnership-centered response struggled to transfer technical know-how and expertise. Partners and Oxfam staff ranked transfer of know-how as the second least achieved outcome of the partnership-centered response in the survey (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 6: WHAT THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE DID NOT ALLOW TO ACHIEVE
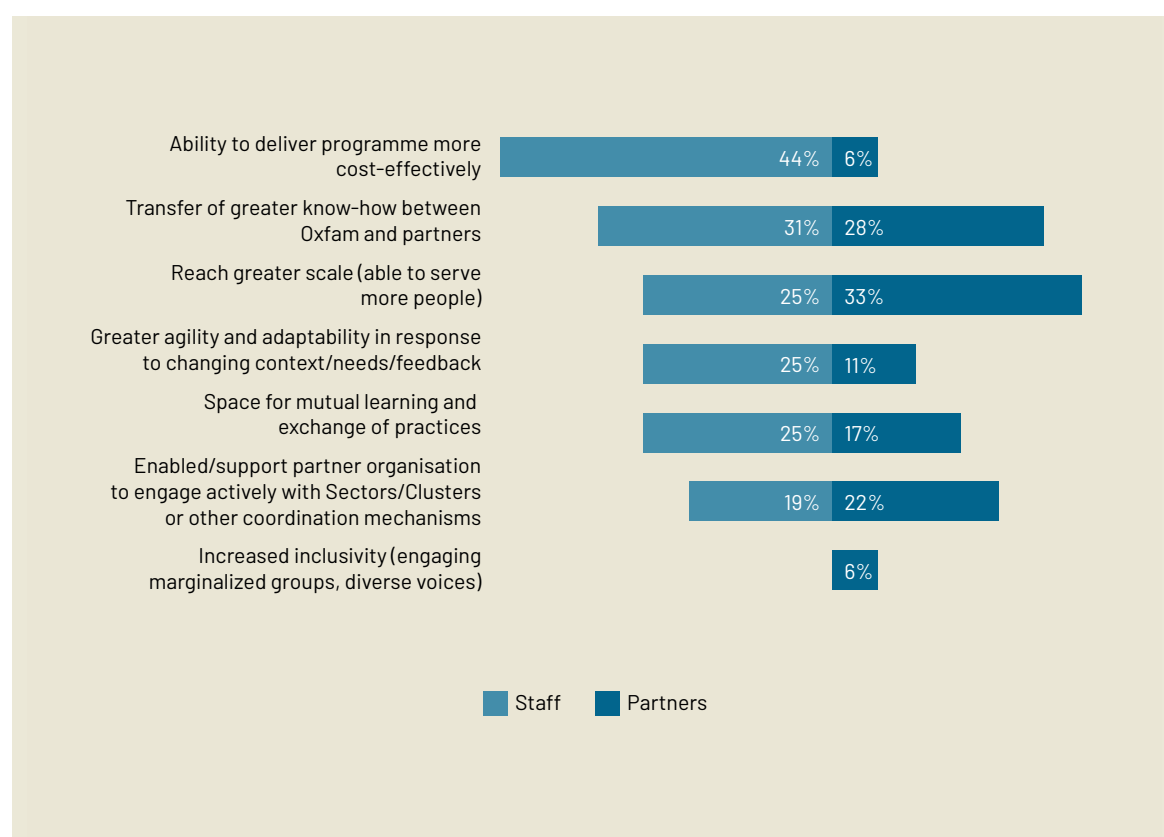
Source: Learning review survey

Oxfam struggled to ensure its expertise was shared through the partnership and ultimately contributed to better outcomes for people affected by the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. Missed opportunities to work more closely with partners were reported by Oxfam in particular on community-based protection work, on protection analysis as well as on strengthening approaches to manage power dynamics within communities and ensure inclusive community participation.[33]

As one Oxfam staff reflected:

> We had a lot of internal discussions on how to improve in that regard. During each round of monthly or quarterly reporting reviews, technical teams would reflect on the reports, often highlighting areas where they struggled to provide the right guidance or where the knowledge transfer to partners could have been better. Despite testing different modalities to channel technical knowledge, I felt we sometimes struggled to get it right" (KII Oxfam staff).

It has been a challenge to fully explain and understand what caused these missed opportunities. On the one hand, program quality and outcomes were less of a focus of the partnership-centered response. Instead, Oxfam invested in implementing its LHL commitments and focused on the ways of partnering - less so in examining the outcomes and impact of the response.

At times, there was also a **lack of technical programmatic advisory capacity** in terms of number of staff in particular national staff. For instance, after the change process in 2024, Oxfam struggled to recruit and maintain a national WASH officer which affected the ability to work closely with program staff in partner organization: *"In terms of technical expertise and know-how, the challenge was maintaining sufficient staff to support partners. In WASH, for example, we never had a full team (…) High turnover was also an issue"* (KII Oxfam staff). Challenges in recruiting such staff in a competitive labor market may be a reflection that Oxfam is not an attractive organization to work with for technical program experts due to its partnership-centered approach. For technical program experts, it may be more attractive to work with organizations that do direct implementation as this may lead to strengthening their professional profile. As a result Oxfam staff reported a lack of capacity to do more shadowing and accompaniment on the program side which restricted opportunities to share technical know-how. According to some Oxfam staff it was also difficult for some program staff to fully shift their mindset from direct implementation to mentoring and supporting partners in maintaining quality on the ground. However, this mindset was shifted in other roles such as finance and compliance roles begging the question of what made it so challenging on programming.

Some Oxfam staff highlighted there was a disconnect between Oxfam and partner program staff. While there were some examples of good collaboration, Oxfam was less able to work directly with program staff within partner organizations. Oxfam staff respected the way partner organizations managed their engagement with Oxfam but highlighted that the relationship was often between partners' management and Oxfam. This may have contributed to Oxfam struggling with finding entry points and opportunities to support more technical staff on quality programming.

There also seems to have been **limited capacity on monitoring aspects of quality programming**. While learning was very evident throughout the partnership-centered response, the more monitoring and evaluative functions of MEAL processes seemed to be a challenge in the partnership-centered response. Oxfam staff talked about the difficulty to fully understand how well needs were met, if the most in need were reached or if AAP systems were working. As one funder explained: *"My only feedback was that we would like to see stronger MEAL analysis and post-distribution monitoring data in the final report, to better evidence those outcomes"* (KII funder).

The learning review found there was a real tension between wanting to maintain good LHL principles in engaging with partners and too proactively lending Oxfam's own expertise in programming. Oxfam staff reported standards and expertise at times were imposed too much and at other times not imposed enough. The learning review sees a missed opportunity here for Oxfam to carefully consider

the role it wants to play in its partnerships. On the one hand, a few Oxfam staff highlighted that donors do not monitor Oxfam's own program quality when doing direct implementation and therefore felt Oxfam should not do this in its partnerships. The learning review team would argue that Oxfam's role should not be equated to that of a donor as Oxfam is not one. The learning review team believes that Oxfam does not want to play the role of a donor in its partnership and should consider its role much beyond that in particular in terms of supporting program quality and outcomes.

Partners did not comment extensively on the technical support they received from Oxfam. The main challenge to Oxfam and other international organizations they work with is that program support is often not contextualized (i.e., replicating program interventions from other continents for instance). However, partners highlighted how much they valued Oxfam's expertise. For Oxfam to define its role as a donor would miss the opportunity Oxfam has to lend its own expertise, ensure it can add value and act in complementarity in its partnerships. Oxfam has developed ways of working with partner organizations on financial management, procurement, reporting and compliance in line with its LHL and feminist commitments; Oxfam could find a way to strengthen program outcomes without acting counter to its LHL and feminist commitments.

> "Why people struggle with this—is that, on the one hand, as a technical person in Oxfam, you are tasked with upholding certain approaches and standards. On the other hand, you are being asked to let go of power and support the partner to deliver a quality response—where "quality" can have a variable definition. There are non-negotiable minimum standards— safeguarding, do-no-harm—but beyond that, partners may define quality differently from us" (KII Oxfam staff).

6.2.3 Cluster coordination seen as inefficient and burdensome for partners

Both external actors and partners felt **Oxfam provided effective support to partners to support their participation, leadership and influence in cluster coordination**. Oxfam supported partner through understanding humanitarian jargon, understanding how cluster coordination functions, sharing practices on how to budget for coordination capacity based on project funding as well as to strengthen MEAL systems in order to actively contribute critical data in the coordination system. As one partner explains:

> "I was struggling a lot with the coordination mechanism—with all these clusters, endless clusters, endless meetings. I did not see any purpose. I felt it just stole my time. In reports, I wrote that I needed Oxfam's assistance in guiding me through this cluster system, because I felt it was completely painful (...) We had several meetings about these clusters and their imperfections. But in 2024, and this year also, I already felt that finally we used this cluster system as it should be (...) But this guidance through the cluster system was very important, because I was so frustrated during the first two years" (KII Partner).

In addition to direct support to partners, external actors interviewed highlighted that Oxfam had been a critical advocate for local humanitarian leadership, especially WLOs and WROs. In spite of not being active in clusters due to limited direct implementation, Oxfam kept its influence in particular through

its participation in the NGO platform and in the Gender In Humanitarian Action Working Group. Oxfam used this influence to enable space for the voice of specific local actors in these forums and beyond.

> "On the advocacy side, we promote these partnership and localization priorities. We also push for broader inclusiveness of civil society – not just the "cute and appropriate" groups donors like to work with, but also LGBTQIA+ organizations, Roma groups, and others. That includes advocacy to the government of Ukraine and sometimes European donors. And that is another area where Oxfam has been really strong, pushing those lines on behalf of their partners" (KII External Actor).

In spite of all of this, **partner organizations still felt that they struggled with participating in the cluster coordination**. Partners ranked being enabled to participate in cluster coordination last as an achievement and third as a limitation of the partnership-centered response in the survey. However, this does not seem to be linked to a lack of support from Oxfam but the nature of the humanitarian coordination system that is burdensome, time consuming and lacking clarity on added value and contributions for many local and national actors.[34] As partners highlighted:

> "Attending cluster meetings and other meetings eats most of the time, and sometimes they are not as efficient. So to take most out of cluster participation, you need to dedicate a lot of time. It is a trade-off: should I spent time attending a cluster meeting, or to write a new grant application" (KII Partner).

One partner however mentioned that the Gender In Humanitarian Action working group was more practical and useful than the cluster coordination. More generally, as one partner highlighted, there was a recognition that influence and power in the humanitarian coordination system was heavily linked with an organization's budget size and operational presence, making it particularly challenging for smaller, specialized local and national organizations to have influence over decisions in the cluster system.

The challenging nature of the humanitarian coordination system is beyond Oxfam's control but calls for Oxfam to continue advocating for system change and supporting a more radical rethinking of what a locally led and locally relevant coordination approach could be.

6.3 WHAT HAS WORKED WELL WITH REGARDS TO PROGRAM QUALITY AND IMPACT

6.3.1 Having redlines and honest discussions with partners leads to principled humanitarian response.

The partnership-centered response was able to uphold the humanitarian principles. Oxfam enabled this by having clear redlines and communicating effectively with partners on these. There were challenges around humanitarian principles, in particular neutrality, but also independence and to a lesser extent impartiality. This required an intentional engagement on the part of Oxfam to integrate red lines on humanitarian principles into partnership agreements and have open and honest dialogue with partner organizations on these principles. As one external humanitarian actor in Ukraine highlighted, humanitarian principles are a challenge in Ukraine and there is a general lack of discussions with local and national actors on this challenge which has led to some lack of principled response in the wider humanitarian response.

Oxfam's practice could therefore be replicated by other donors and organizations in Ukraine. Oxfam openly shared red lines on humanitarian principles in particular insisting that it would not partner with organizations that support the military, whether or not this included Oxfam's funding. Some partnerships were ended as a result of this red line. Oxfam also had to discuss how the principle of independence should be maintained in the response. Oxfam outlined the need to balance between aligning with government priorities and maintaining the principles of independence and impartiality. Initially, not all partners understood the importance of keeping this independence from government while others needed reassurance that consultation and collaboration with local authorities was a good practice. Oxfam worked with partners on how their collaborated with local authorities ensuring that partners carried out independent verification of program participant lists and conducted their own targeting of program participants. This is where some challenges with the principle of impartiality were identified and redressed.

The way Oxfam engaged on humanitarian principles is a great example of an organization identifying where having clear red lines are necessary for humanitarian outcomes. Oxfam did this while maintaining key commitments on local humanitarian leadership and through dialogue with partners.

6.3.2 Connecting partners to enable them to learn from each other

The partnership-centered response offered a platform where partners could exchange their expertise and know-how with each other, Oxfam facilitated and supported peer to peer learning including through bringing partners together. As one partner outlined:

> "They created this space where we could introduce ourselves to other organizations, get acquainted somehow, and later collaborate, keep in touch, and support each other as well. It was very important not only that Oxfam guided us into other networking spaces, but also that they created these spaces. It was really great" (KII partner).

One partner felt there could have been more intentional collaboration across partners. Sharing expertise on the inclusion of specific population groups across all partners and facilitating more intersectional analysis and interventions could have been done more systematically and would have been welcomed by partners. The learning review also found limited examples of sharing of expertise from partners to Oxfam. The first learning review identified the expertise of some partner organizations on feminist principles and gender transformative work as an area where Oxfam could benefit from more learning. However, this learning review was not able to see examples of this happening.

6.3.3 Oxfam invested in and supported better CFM, AAP and safeguarding albeit late in the response

Initially, accountability to affected people, participation and safeguarding were not well established within partner organizations' systems and ways of working. Some Oxfam staff highlighted that safeguarding does not translate in Ukrainian and that culturally the concept felt strange to partners. One partner acknowledged their own lack of safeguarding systems and good practices. This only came to their attention late in the response as Oxfam initially lacked safeguarding capacity to engage partners on this issue. This partner welcomed Oxfam having more safeguarding capacity and felt this was a critical capacity for Oxfam to maintain. For instance, in one report to Oxfam, one organization thanked Oxfam for their safeguarding training highlighting it allowed them to further systematize their beneficiary protection processes and leading to the drafting of a safeguarding policy and team

capacity strengthening on safeguarding. There were initial pushbacks from some partners on the need for safeguarding and some partners expressed that abuse and exploitation from aid workers were things that did not happen in Ukraine. This required careful dialogue from Oxfam to highlight the risks and the importance of having strong safeguarding systems in place.

There were also assumptions made by partners and Oxfam on accountability to affected people. Proximity to and knowledge of communities were often seen as enough by partners to ensure accountability as opposed to an approach based on proactively ensuring accountability and participation of program participants. During FGDs, the idea of participation in program design for instance was welcomed by program participants while also perceived as quite foreign and unusual. Oxfam partners and external actors noted during interviews that AAP is an overall humanitarian response wide challenge in Ukraine. Oxfam has however developed strong practices and expertise on community led approaches including in their protection work that put participation at the heart of the way they work. Some Oxfam staff felt the partnership-centered response missed opportunities to work with partners on community participation and accountability. In addition, Oxfam stopped its own complaint and feedback mechanisms in 2024 which again presented a missed opportunity to strengthen AAP in the partnership-centered response.

Program participants interviewed during FGDs highlighted many channels were available to communicate with partners and provide feedback although not all program participants knew about partners' complaints and feedback mechanisms. Some program participants only reported knowing about public feedback channels and did not know whether the organization had more anonymous and private feedback channels. Staff changes also led to losing direct contact with the organization in some instances. Some program participants highlighted that the partner organization that supported them were very proactive in asking feedback on the quality of their interventions and maintaining constant contact. Other program participants reported being able to provide feedback face to face and this was considered most effective. Program participants also highlighted changes made to program interventions based on feedback as well as the partner organization actively seeking their inputs into the design of interventions. FGDs conducted in collective sites highlighted that there was no knowledge of how to feedback directly to partner organizations. However, program participants in collective sites explained their inputs were actively sought and they were consulted in how bathroom repairs should be designed to support people with low mobility.

7. PUTTING LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERHSHIP AND FEMINIST PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

7. PUTTING LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERHSHIP AND FEMINIST PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

Oxfam has committed to supporting local humanitarian leadership including through adhering to key partnership principles that uphold equality, mutual respect and shared accountability. Oxfam also aspires to work according to feminist principles (see Annex 2). While partnership and feminist principles are distinct in Oxfam's policies and guidance, Oxfam staff often linked the two with each other during interview. One interviewee defined Oxfam's ways of working as "LHL Plus" where feminist principles come to reinforce partnership principles and LHL commitments. The learning review concluded that for Oxfam there cannot be LHL without feminist principles and there cannot be feminist principles without LHL.

> "I feel like partnership and feminist lenses and feminist principles, they come together. You cannot separate these two. They are very much interlinked. We are very lucky here because this is something that has been really put into life very strongly" (KII Oxfam staff).

7.1 EXTENT OF APPLICATION OF THESE PRINCIPLES IN THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE

7.1.1 LHL and feminist principles largely implemented in the response...

Interviews with Oxfam staff as well as partners (and some external actors) demonstrated how present LHL and feminist principles were in the partnership-centered response. Oxfam systematically and openly talked about these commitments within the Oxfam team, with partners and in external fora. Partners were very aware of Oxfam's commitments. Oxfam staff talked about ongoing reflections and discussions within Oxfam examining how far the partnership-centered response was adhering to LHL and feminist principles. When asked for examples of how LHL and feminist principles were put in practice in Oxfam's day to day work, staff mentioned a range of examples including:

- Sharing space and giving access to spaces for partners including supporting participation in regional and international fora for WLOs and WROs to influence global policies;
- Supporting partners with their own advocacy agenda for instance supporting Voices of Romni with their national level engagement on Roma issues;
- Supporting visibility of partners in British media over Oxfam's visibility;
- Partners being able to ask for and receive support from Oxfam as an example of complementarity;
- Showing respect and shared accountability through adapting processes including proposals and timelines collaboratively, offering mentoring on MEAL, maintaining open, supportive communication instead of punitive feedback loops.

Oxfam staff felt that a good example of feminist principles was Oxfam listening to their partners who then listened to their communities. This was especially so when listening to women and women leadership. The fact that Oxfam enabled partners to shift and adapt their programs based on needs was also seen as an application of LHL and feminist principles. Oxfam staff also felt that partners feeling they could provide feedback to Oxfam was a demonstration of feminist principles.

More generally, Oxfam staff felt that these principles had been part of the DNA of the partnership-centered response from the beginning especially with the decision to make the response partnership-centered, to have partners design their own interventions and continuing into the second phase of the response by having partners design their own institutional strengthening plan. The WHLF was also seen as the epitome of what LHL and feminist principles should aim to do. This was because of its focus on WROs but also because it funded these organizations to do what they see as the most critical for women's rights rather than pushing them into humanitarian service delivery.

The fact that Oxfam was intentional on working with specific organizations including WROs, WLOs and organizations run by and for marginalized population groups is a critical way in which Oxfam has joined its LHL and feminist principles. As an external actor highlighted, this is particularly relevant and important because localization efforts in Ukraine have in many ways reinforced power dynamics. A more intersectional approach to LHL and feminist principles was seen as a way to challenge national power dynamics and ensure that certain types of organizations are not left behind. The advocacy of Oxfam, alongside others, on ensuring the participation of WROs, WLOs, LGBTQIA+ and Roma organizations in the NGO forum and other coordination spaces was seen as critical.

One hundred percent of partners who participated in the survey considered Oxfam's partnership approach to be either excellent (83%) or good (17%) (see Figure 7). Oxfam staff were slightly more critical of Oxfam's partnership approach with 25% considering fair and 69% considering it good. When asked, partners found it difficult to highlight challenges they faced in their partnership with Oxfam as the quality of the partnership was comparatively much higher than with other international organizations. One external actor interviewed also highlighted independently hearing positive feedback from organizations that partner with Oxfam on the quality of the partnership.

FIGURE 7: HOW WOULD YOU RATE OXFAM'S PARTNERSHIP APPROACH?
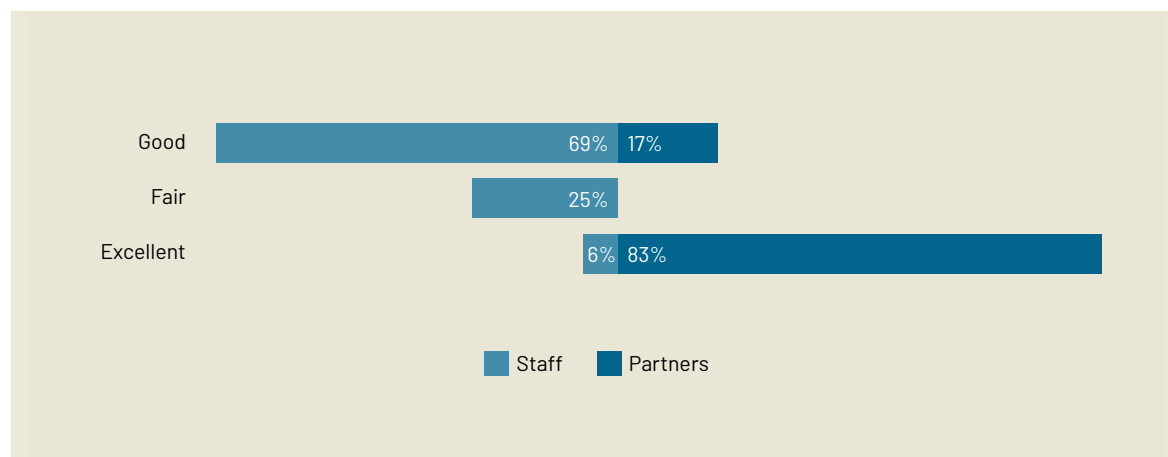
Source: Learning review survey

Equality and mutual respect were strongly emphasized by partners and Oxfam staff as having been implemented in Oxfam's daily practice and interactions with partners. Partners felt they were in the driving seat and Oxfam used flexible funding to amplify partners' achievements rather than micromanage. Oxfam staff consistently described Oxfam's approach as listening-based, flexible and responsive.

> "From the start, we felt what we can provide our opinion and that our experience really matters in cooperation with Oxfam. It was not something forced. We did not have this feeling that we are forced by Oxfam to do something or we are forced by Oxfam to change something. It was very organic" (KII Partner).

LHL and feminist principles in practice were described around the criticality of shifting power and power sharing. Oxfam staff spoke of reflecting on who should make what decisions and being very aware of the need to give up their space in decision-making arenas. Staff and partners felt decision-making was partnership-centered with Oxfam playing a more limited role in discussion and prioritization and not imposing its views.

Both partners and staff felt that feminist principles were implemented in the partnership–centered response (see Figure 8). Partners ranked higher the feminist principles that applied more externally including participation, equality and support to feminist actors. While Oxfam staff prioritized the application of internal principles such as power-sharing, reflection on bias, freedom of expression and safety. Differences reflect unique perspectives with partners focusing on outcomes and participation and Oxfam staff reflecting more on internal practices and organizational culture.

FIGURE 8: WHICH FEMINIST PRINCIPLES APPLIED IN THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE?

Source: Learning review survey

However, partners have mixed reactions to the feminist principles. One partner wanted more implementation of the feminist approach and wanted Oxfam to push their understanding beyond justice for women. Another partner though felt it would be better for Oxfam to insist less on feminist principles. Differences in attitude towards the feminist principles may result for partner organizations' existing principles and commitments with rights-based organizations being more attuned to these principles.

Oxfam staff members reflected on the internal application of feminist principles. While not all Oxfam staff members agreed (see section below), Oxfam staff talked of having a safe working environment where it was safe to fail, decisions were shared and a democratic culture existed within the team. Oxfam staff mentioned how the Culture Working Group and staff representatives were initiatives

attempting to translate feminist principles into workplace culture. Women in leadership positions in the senior leadership team was seen as an example of feminist principles at play, while others still noted that only international staff were present in the senior leadership team reinforcing the power dynamics between national and international staff.

> "What I value in Oxfam is the management really takes care of the staff. The internal environment is open to conversations and you can propose anything yourself. if not comfortable, you have the staff representative. They tried to restore the culture working group. For the staff representative, it works really well" (KII Oxfam staff).

Oxfam staff linked the internal working culture and application of feminist principles to their ability to apply LHL commitments and feminist principles with partners. Oxfam staff feeling listened to, valued, having space for discussions and feeling safe to try and fail were all critical. As a result Oxfam staff felt they could be innovative, adaptive and vulnerable in the way they engaged with partners.

> "In my department I felt comfortable. And that also made me feel more comfortable with partners. I am not stressed about how I will be perceived so I can allow myself that flexibility when I talk to partners. I am never told it is not ok. If it works and it improves relationship with partners it is ok do what you do. By extension I feel more empowered to do the same with partners" (KII Oxfam staff).

7.1.2 ...Less so for more strategic decisions

Where there was less success in implementing LHL and feminist principles, however, and as noted in the first learning review (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam International, 2024), was on sharing power and engaging partners in strategic decisions. The phase 2 strategy was designed and decided upon without partner engagement. This did not sit comfortably with several Oxfam staff who expressed their uneasiness with the lack of partner engagement in the phase 2 strategy design. Partners were less vocal on not being engaged in designing the strategy but felt there had been less open and honest dialogue with Oxfam on their decision to exit Ukraine, often highlighting they did not understand that choice. However, the survey results confirmed that partners considered having the least influence on the phase 2 strategy, the decision of Oxfam to exit Ukraine and Oxfam's transitioning out of the country (see Figure 9). The learning review notes the challenge of engaging partners in the phase 2 strategy design as Oxfam was at the time unsure which partners were going to become strategic partners and therefore included in this second phase. While this is a challenge, there was still a missed opportunity to involve partner in this extremely critical and strategic decision.

FIGURE 9: WHICH AREAS DO PARTNERS HAVE THE LEAST INFLUENCE ON?
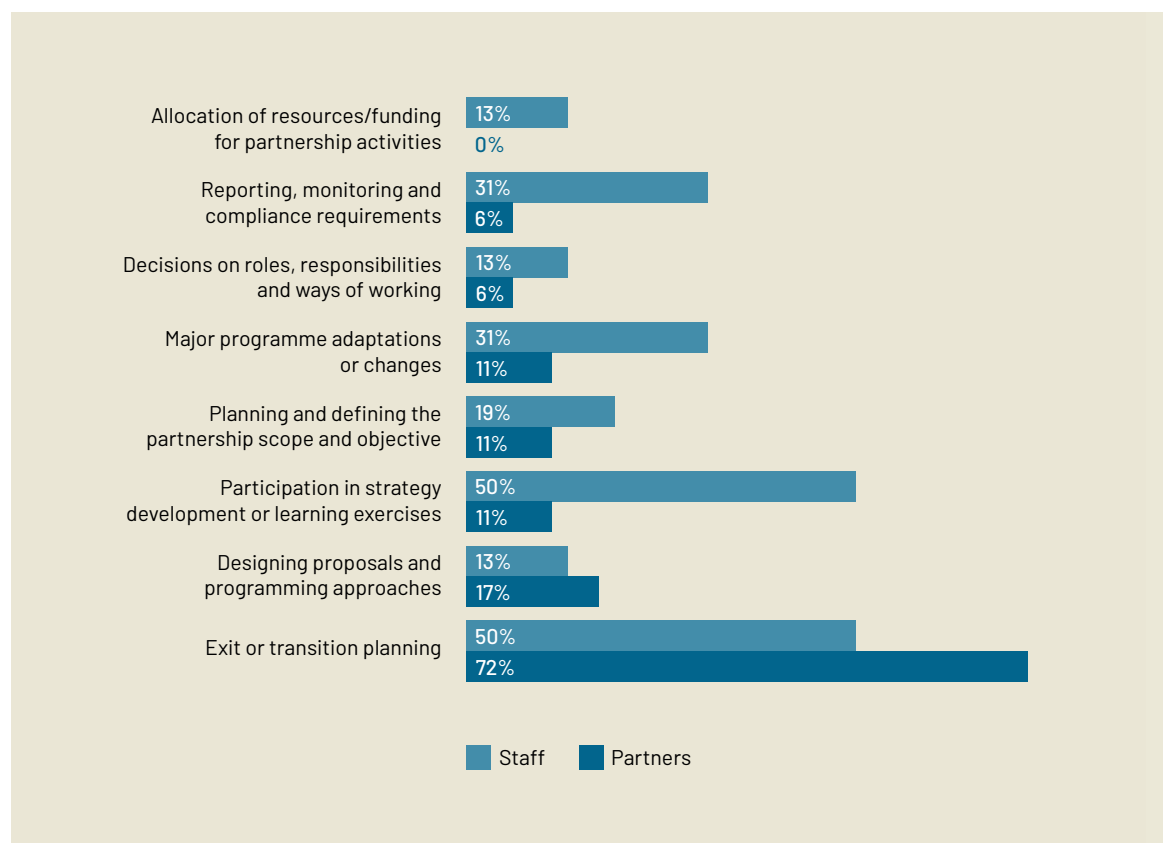
Source: Learning review survey

7.1.3 Challenges with defining and measuring success for LHL and feminist principles

The last learning review noted that Oxfam has not yet establishment an approach to measuring progress on its LHL and feminist principles (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam International, 2024). This continues to be a missed opportunity for Oxfam to keep itself accountable for the commitments and principles it adopts. The partnership-centered response in Ukraine would have been a perfect testing ground for Oxfam to consider further how success should be defined, the role of partners in defining what success looks like and linking the ways of partnering with outcomes for people affected by the full-scale invasion.

The response had a clear focus on learning and invested in collectively documenting the experience and identifying lessons from the partnership-centered response (see Box 2). Learning documents capture lessons from ISI. The WHLF organized a partnership learning workshop to inform its second phase as well as a learning review. Including this learning review, the response benefited from two independently conducted learning review. Perception and feedback on the partnership were also part of partners' reporting template.

> **BOX 2: THE PARTNERSHIP-CENTERED RESPONSE LEARNING QUESTIONS.**
>
> 1. **Shifting Power:** Are we working in a way that is in line with Oxfam values of anti-racism, intersectional feminism, decolonizing the humanitarian sector and shifting power?
> 2. **Partnerships:** What do we mean by 'partnership-centered,' in the Ukraine Regional Response, and what learning have we gained during the response both on partnerships principles and Oxfam's operational capacity to implement this type of response?
> 3. **Response model:** What are the key learning points for setting up and working in an out of presence response (with main focus on business support, operating systems and capacity)?
> 4. **Humanitarian Principles:** Are we upholding humanitarian principles in the response?

The response however lacked a more structured approach to defining and measuring what success looks like when it comes to a partnership-centered response based on LHL and feminist principles. The wider Oxfam confederation is working on developing a measurement framework on LHL and feminist principles but has yet to define this for its responses. Some conceptual tensions do exist within Oxfam. This was reflected in some wider Oxfam interviews highlighting that within Oxfam some people defined LHL as an end in itself (i.e. focused on the process of partnering), while others defined it as a means to an end (i.e. focused on the outcomes it leads to for affected populations). Similarly, it was not always clear whether feminist principles were defined as a way of working and partnering or as the impact of Oxfam on transforming gender relations. These conceptual differences were echoed in the partnership-centered response in particular when it comes to the place of program outcomes versus the process of partnering.

> "A means to an end or an end in itself? That is a good question there is still a lot of different opinions within Oxfam on that the trend is a widespread belief that locally led responses are the most effective the most appropriate so it is one and the same. But because of our values and principles and commitments we have made local leadership as a commitment." (KII Oxfam staff).

While these ways of defining and measuring success are not mutually exclusive, they do require careful considerations in terms of how they might be balanced in a measurement framework. Literature on LHL have also highlighted the importance of considering the longer-term impact of support to LHL in humanitarian crises on community and societal resilience, on governance but also on the ability of these communities and societies to respond to future humanitarian crises (see Barbelet et al., 2021). Defining success and measuring LHL and feminist efforts should also be done in collaboration with partners and contextualized to specific crises.

External organizations interviewed were also struggling with measuring the implementation of LHL and feminist principles. One external actor notes they had recently moved towards much more qualitative indicators looking for instance beyond the number of local actors in coordination mechanisms and focusing on the difference it made to have local actors in the room in terms of focus and outcomes of decisions. While adopting more qualitative indicators of success resonates, this may also bring a challenge as MEAL capacities in the humanitarian sector often lack the experience and the skills to measure and analyze qualitative data as noted by Oxfam staff themselves.

7.2 WHAT ENABLED THE RESPONSE TO IMPLEMENT LHL AND FEMINIST PRINCIPLES

7.2.1 Leadership, organizational and management culture

The leadership of the partnership-centered response set the tone clearly on the importance of LHL and feminist principles. Oxfam staff were clear that these principles were critical and each individual was responsible for integrating them in their work. According to Oxfam staff, the leadership style by adopting a learning and adaptive management approach also facilitated the implementation of LHL and feminist principles. Adaptative management supports flexible ways of working, self-reflection, learning from negative outcomes as opposed to blaming, all ways of working that are fit for purpose and in line with LHL and feminist principles. The management culture through creating discussion spaces also led to collaboration and self-reflection on individual's and team's practices, giving a space to review practices and shift them where needed. This was seen as critical by Oxfam staff also because it positioned senior leadership in a facilitating and listening role. Several Oxfam staff highlighted that the senior leadership of the response was not necessarily experts on LHL and feminist principles but their willingness to discuss, listen, learn from staff and act on what they heard were seen as critical to enabling the implementation these principles. Oxfam's overall culture as an organization that thinks carefully about how and why they do things also supported the overall implementation of these principles.

7.2.2 Staff support

Oxfam staff felt supported in implementing LHL and feminist principles. There is clarity in policy commitments and guidance especially on LHL to enable Oxfam staff to understand their role and responsibilities. Induction processes included these and staff felt they were informed from the start of their work at Oxfam. Guidance on feminist principles was less adequate with little practical guidance on how to apply them (see section below).

Certain roles were seen as critical in supporting staff through implementing LHL and feminist principles in their daily work. The gender adviser was reported to have been a critical asset to the team, supporting the staff to understand feminist principles better and how they applied to individual jobs specifically. Given the complexity of applying feminist principles and in spite of years of work within Oxfam to institutionalize the learning, having dedicated gender capacity was still seen as essential to implementing the feminist principles in a response. Having dedicated partnership staff was also seen as critical, to help with coordinating and managing communication with partners, not to overburden them but also to support staff with how they should work and engage with partners.

7.2.3 Staff self-awareness

During interviews, Oxfam staff demonstrated a significant awareness of their own positionality and power. They were highly aware of the perceptions partners had of Oxfam as a donor and how this shaped interaction. For instance, one interviewee reflected that if you ask partner organizations staff for their time, they will always say yes because they see Oxfam as a donor and they want to please their donors. This is whether or not partners see this interaction as beneficial to them or not. As a result, a number of Oxfam staff explained how they would engage partners carefully to mitigate this power dynamic, reflecting by themselves on whether a request was made in a way that was clearly outlined as voluntary, with no consequence for refusing to engage and how this would benefit the partner organization rather than Oxfam. One Oxfam staff also adopted humility and vulnerability as principles to approach partners clearly outlining when they did not have an answer or did not have a solution as way to display that Oxfam was not the expert in the room thus reducing uneven power dynamics. Being aware of one's own power is a critical step to shifting power. This was evident within the attitude and culture of Oxfam staff interviewed for this learning review.

7.3 CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING LHL AND FEMINIST PRINCIPLES

7.3.1 Power can never be fully equal between Oxfam and its partners

As much as Oxfam tried to mitigate and shift power, power can never be fully equal between Oxfam and partners due to the nature of how resources flow. As highlighted above, Oxfam staff's self-awareness of their own power and positionality informed proactive ways to try and mitigate this inherent power differential. However, the power dynamic was exemplified by Oxfam not sharing power over more strategic decisions. Partners disagree with Oxfam leaving Ukraine. Yet, they have no influence over that decision. Some Oxfam staff reflected that partners wanting Oxfam to stay should not be in itself a reason to stay and could lead to Oxfam staying in the country for the wrong reasons. This should be recognized and accepted as a limitation of where power is shared. It is also important for Oxfam to be clear on where it feels a decision belongs to them while communicating openly about why they feel this or what constrains more shared power over certain decisions.

7.3.2 Lack of contextualisation of feminist principles

Some partners and Oxfam staff felt the way Oxfam applied their feminist principles was not always in line with the Ukraine context. Some interviewees highlighted that women leadership is not a contested topic in Ukraine with high levels of women leadership in politics and civil society. As a result, some felt the feminist principles were not always in tune with the reality of Ukraine which led to some pushback. Within Oxfam, feminist principles were sometimes perceived as "labels" rather than lived practices and not always relevant. Pushback were also noted with some colleagues commenting during a staff retreat that Oxfam was "too feminist." While some of this points to differences in attitudes and adoption of the principles, it also appears to have resulted from not acknowledging where progress already existed within Ukrainian society and having discussions with partners and staff on the applicability of feminist principles beyond women's leadership to reflect of one's own power.

> "We face internal pushback in different forms. Some staff simply do not see the need for gender equality or think having more women in the team means equality has already been achieved. Others see feminist principles as just another box to tick alongside localization and partnership priorities. That perception can prevent integration of feminist thinking into power-sharing and internal practices. We have not yet found a way to break down feminist principles into concrete actions that are embedded across the response without constantly having to use the label "feminist." And sometimes, the word itself creates resistance — people get hooked on it rather than unpacking the underlying practices it represents. Avoiding the word can steer people off course, but insisting on it can create pushback" (KII Oxfam staff).

7.3.3 Inherent tensions with the culture of certain nationalities and functions

The ways of working to implement LHL and feminist principles were seen as being more challenging by Oxfam staff depending on where they came from but also the type of functions they held. While not incompatible – and as evidenced by Oxfam staff implementing these principles, it is important to consider that individuals raised in national cultures were debating, arguing and openly reflecting can more easily adapt to Oxfam's culture and Oxfam's ways of supporting a response through discussion

and exchange. As mentioned above, the space created by the leadership to openly discuss how LHL and feminist principles apply and reflections on how best to work with partners was a critical element that enabled and supported staff to understand how these principles played out in their everyday work. However, one can see how coming from a national culture where such practices are not common requires more adaptation from staff.

Similarly, one needs to recognize and consider that certain functions and professional sectors are valued because they follow rules, technical standards, standard operating procedures. The culture of such functions bring inherent tensions for staff who are asked to bring in flexibility, tailoring to partners and adaptability. In such functions, the power also lies with the rule or the standard rather than the individuals upholding them making it challenging at times to let go while still feeling they are doing well in their work. Managing these inherent tensions is critical and starts by recognizing that they exist and supporting staff through the anxiety that flexibility and uncertainty may bring when implementing LHL and feminist principles. This is also where having dedicated gender and partnership advisors helps to accompany these individuals. As one Oxfam staff acknowledges:

> "Breaking out of "we've always done it this way" has been a struggle. People need to question why they do things, whether it is habit or necessity, and that questioning is uncomfortable. Embedding feminist principles internally is particularly challenging because the principles themselves do not give clear guidance on building culture — they are mostly statements on paper" (KII Oxfam staff).

7.3.4 Feminist principles are inherently hard to put in practice

The first learning review highlighted the lack of translation of feminist principes into more practical guidance (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam International, 2024). Feminist principles are inherently hard to translate into practice and into practical guidance. These principles are ideological rather than practical. They are reflexive and personal and require inner questioning and reflection. This is not something that staff can easily be trained on. A number of Oxfam staff reflected on the fact that the implementation of feminist principles had been a long journey for Oxfam but also a journey for them. Some staff explained how they had initially reacted to these principles and how years down the line they could see the impact of the principles on their day-to-day practice. One Oxfam staff said it was only when attending the WHLF learning workshop that they finally understood these principles more practically because they were exemplified through the testimony of WHLF partners.

7.3.5 Challenges with having new staff members

The high turn-over as well as the restructure meant that Oxfam onboarded a high number of new staff in the second phase of the response. Oxfam staff perceived the mix of new and old Oxfam staff as generally a good thing but having too many new staff potentially a challenge for implementing LHL and feminist principles. This is because, as outlined above, it takes time to integrate and understand these principles especially when it comes to feminist principles. Because LHL and feminist inspired organizations are few in the humanitarian sector, recruiting new staff almost always entails these individuals are new to LHL and feminist principles. While this is mitigated by a structured onboarding process, support and training, new staff felt it was harder for them to operationalize these principles.

7.3.6 Careful not to close down debate on LHL and feminist principles

Oxfam's commitments to LHL and feminist principles led to a closing down of discussion on these principles for some Oxfam staff. An approach to LHL and feminist principles that does not allow space for critical dialogue, questioning and the recognition of diverse perspectives can also turn un-feminist. Some Oxfam staff expressed that they themselves or colleagues felt unable to express doubts or question the practice of Oxfam on LHL and feminist principles. While this tension is often characterized by tensions between more compliant, rule abiding and standard setting functions with more partnership-oriented functions, it does raise the challenge of how to ensure that staff can express where they feel there is a risk of letting go of power too much. Having a space that is safe to question and discuss the balance between Oxfam's experience and know-how and the leadership of partners is critical for Oxfam to implement LHL and feminist principles without losing its added value and complementarity. It is also a critical element of Oxfam's own risk management.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The partnership-centered response in Ukraine has been an experiment in fully embracing LHL and feminist principles. In doing so, it **unleashed the full power and impact of local and national organizations' leadership** in humanitarian responses. It demonstrated the ability and possibility of doing a partnership-centered response in a conflict setting, while ensuring principled humanitarian action. It also demonstrated the applicability of focusing on institutional strengthening in the midst of a humanitarian crisis and the importance of supporting WROs with their core mandate through the WHLF.

As part of this experience, Oxfam was able to adapt its internal processes to better align with a partnership-centered model, with the most significant changes occurring in due diligence, partnership agreements and reporting. Far from reducing standards, these **internal processes were contextualized, adapted and made more relevant**. The 2024 team restructure marked a decisive shift in Oxfam's operating model from supporting partners' program delivery through selected functions to positioning the entire team as a service to partners. This transition placed LHL and organizational strengthening at the center of Oxfam's structure and ways of working. This supported the ISI which made the core of Oxfam's responsible phase-out strategy, investing in partners' leadership and sustainability. Institutional strengthening plans were designed and led by partners, with technical accompaniment tailored to each partner.

The partner-led response led to better outcomes for people affected by the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. It was **principled, accountable, relevant, able to adapt to changing needs**, in a timely manner; the partner-led response reached hard to reach population and was **inclusive of more marginalized population groups**. This was significantly due to partners' own capacity, relationships with communities, proximity to communities and ability to understand the context. Partners' capacity and ways of working were supported and facilitated by Oxfam's approach to partnering, particularly through the trust-based nature of the partnerships and Oxfam's adaptability to partners' needs.

This review found key elements that enabled and supported the partnership-centered response. **Leadership was a critical cross-cutting enabler** of the partnership-centered response. At different levels of Oxfam confederation through affiliates to the Ukraine response leadership, there was a clear alignment and agreement on risk appetite and support to try new ways of partnering and working. This allowed Oxfam staff to adapt ways of working around internal processes. The Ukraine response leadership adopted an adaptive and learning management approach and was described as intentional – taking time to reflect not only on what the organization does but how it does it. This provided the space necessary for staff to learn new ways of working and partnering. It is fostered the right skillset and mindset to adopt the flexibility needed to implement a partnership-centered response.

Leadership as an enabler was further supporting by a strong financial base through having appeal funding (including from the DEC). Appeal funding especially from the DEC tends to be highly flexible. This allowed Oxfam flexibility within its budget and across budget line which directly translated in partners' ability to shift budgets and therefore program focus according to changing needs and emerging crises. Because Oxfam was able to translate the flexibility of appeal funding in their partnerships, it ensured partner organizations could make the most of their own capacity to identify shifting priorities and needs and to intervene in a relevant and adaptive manner. This was further reflected in feedback from program participants.

It is the interaction of **Oxfam's leadership approach coupled with the financial flexibility** of appeal funding that allowed the partnership-centered response to implement flexibility as a mindset and skillset. One enabler without the other would have made it more challenging to foster flexibility as mindset and skillset.

The Ukraine response demonstrated clearly that what enabled a genuine partnership-centered model was not new processes, tools or templates, but a **shift in mindset**: from control to collaboration, from compliance to conversation. What mattered was not the *what* of procedures, but the *how* of engagement: attitude, behavior, and relational practice.

Similarly, while the financial support from the ISI gave partners the ability to hire dedicated staff, the non-financial support from the ISI was repeatedly highlighted as its strength. This non-financial support took the form of tailored and relationship-based accompaniment including travelling to partners across Ukraine, holding bilateral discussions, playing a critical friend role through revising funding proposals, offering mentoring and coaching rather than predefined training.

Some gaps remain in the experience of the partnership-centered response in Ukraine. Oxfam has yet to define what success looks like for a partnership-centered response under-pinned by LHL and feminist principles. This partly led to the lack of visibility of program quality in Oxfam's ways of partnering and a less intentional partnership-centered approach to program outcomes. And while learning was at the core of the response to inform adaptation and innovation, a more structured and intentional approach to MEAL based on a clear definition of what a successful partnership-centered response looks like was missing. This is a critical element of Oxfam's own accountability to understand how well it is implementing its own commitments and principles. It is also an accountability to affected people in delivering partnership-centered responses that clearly outline their commitments to humanitarian outcomes. **More structured MEAL can also support Oxfam's advocacy on LHL and feminist principles** to inform and incentivize the wider humanitarian sector's approach to localization.

Oxfam struggled and has yet to find the right approach to sharing its technical program know-how. Oxfam was partly plagued by fear of imposing its own standards and ways of doing thing and thus shied away from a more joint responsibility around improving program quality through sharing technical know-how. Partners recognize Oxfam's experience and expertise and want to benefit from these through their partnerships with Oxfam. Oxfam needs to consider how it can **act in complementarity, clearly defining its added value and role in the partnership with regards to program quality and impact**, while doing so in line with its LHL and feminist principles. These principles do not take away Oxfam's responsibility for the outcomes of the partnership-centered response but shapes how this should be done so as not to impose.

There were gaps in shared understanding and integration of risk sharing. While risk sharing became a frequent term in internal and external discussions, its meaning remained conceptually ambiguous. Although risk matrices were systematically developed as part of every project proposal, there was no structured mechanism to follow up on these risks as part of the partnership or to escalate them beyond the project level. The absence of established spaces for jointly discussing risks with partners limited opportunities to reflect on how risks were distributed and managed between Oxfam and partner organizations, and to promote a **more deliberate, balanced approach to risk sharing**.

This is a critical moment for Oxfam to reflect on how to use the learning from the partnership-centered response in Ukraine. The learning review frequently heard that the partnership-centered response was uniquely facilitated by a set of specific circumstances: a response in Europe that benefited from double standards[35], unusually high levels of funding, including large-scale flexible funding for Oxfam; and high levels of trust in national and local organizations, which were generally well capacitated. This allowed Oxfam to focus on reaching the most vulnerable, while maintaining an appropriate scale of response. The partnership-centered response in Ukraine also benefitted from strong internal backing within the Oxfam confederation and an open risk appetite to experiment with news ways of working and partnering. This has led to many within Oxfam questioning the **replicability of the approach** especially questioning whether such a way of partnering and working would be feasible with

institutional donor funding, in a crisis where scale was critical, and in a non-European response. The uniqueness of the partnership-centered response in Ukraine was also nuanced within Oxfam with examples of similar approaches being implemented in places where Oxfam has had a longer presence such as in Colombia, Kenya, Myanmar and the Philippines. No one response is the same. However, there are learnings from the partnership-centered response in Ukraine that can and should be taken forward within Oxfam, by donors and by other humanitarian actors committed to supporting local humanitarian leadership. The below recommendations aim to identify how this can be done, focusing on replicating enablers and addressing remaining barriers. These recommendations in many ways reiterate findings from other research on local humanitarian leadership and partnership. As such, while the recommendations link directly to the experience of the partnership-centered response in Ukraine, the evidence base exist beyond this unique example.[36]

Recommendations for Oxfam

- **Actively engage donors** in displaying what funding flexibility has enabled Oxfam and partners to achieve in Ukraine, and advocate for donors to adapt and adopt more flexible ways of supporting LHL in the humanitarian sector. This includes in particular:
    – Delivering relevant interventions that are adaptive to changing needs and responsive to new situations, thanks to partners' agility and proximity to communities, facilitated by Oxfam's ability to shift program focus and budget lines without requiring prior donor approval.

- **Actively engage with other humanitarian actors** in Ukraine and beyond to advocate for improved partnership practices. This could take the form of peer-to-peer technical workshops in particular between finance and compliance functions, fundraising, advocacy, program partnership, program technical advisory functions. Of critical importance is for Oxfam to share its experience of adapting processes and tools within existing systems by focusing on the relational dimension (e.g., avoiding 'punitive' approaches and instead finding solutions together on financial management and compliance; and identifying what is essential and building a dialogue around these processes).

- **Continue to document in detail this experience**, share learnings within Oxfam to embed ways of working beyond the Ukraine response. While this learning review has been able to examine the response and document some of its workings, internal documentation of how processes were adapted in detail, creating libraries of approaches, adapted tools and procedures are critical to help institutionalize the experience of the partnership-centered response in Ukraine. The focus should also be on documenting particularly the relational dimensions of the partnership-centered approach as enablers of trust and collaboration within an environment still dominated by upward accountability. While every response will be different due to context as well as the partners involved, the approaches, tools, templates, and supporting learning documents should be preserved and made available to other responses to build a library of good practices and approaches to institutional strengthening.

- **Work to revise Oxfam's internal audit practices** to make them more fit for purpose in partnership-centered responses and in line with LHL and feminist principles. Integrate Ukraine learning into the development of a dedicated internal audit framework for partner-centered responses, to ensure that audit tools and criteria assess partnership practice and proportional risk management, instead of legacy direct-implementation standards.

- **Explore the possibility of extending multi-year funding to partners** in partnership-centered response, challenging remaining barriers as well as through dialogue with donors on shared risk thresholds.

- **Establish structured yet "good enough" spaces for open discussion on risks with partner organizations**, recognizing that partners are independent actors with the right to define and act on their own risk appetite. While categories of risk may be shared, their perception, prioritization, and tolerance levels often differ. These discussions should clarify respective risk ownership, shared responsibilities, and the type of support Oxfam can offer – both preventive and reactive – based on context, available resources, and the complementarity of each partner's risk profile and capacities. Oxfam should play an active role in supporting partners to define and resource sustainable, context-specific mitigation strategies, as part of a holistic and consistent approach to risk management that supports genuine risk sharing. This requires moving from intentional but informal practices toward documented, substantive risk-sharing mechanisms integrated into partnership management processes.

- **Reflect further on the response and team structure**, and document what an ideal organogram would look like – particularly the capacities required to support institutional strengthening through both financial and non-financial support, including the technical program advisory expertise needed. Capacities may change and shift overtime and thus institutional strengthening capacities may need to be considered through more agile and flexible capacities from regional or HQ offices. The ISI financial envelope already provides partners with the possibility to contract external expertise for institutional strengthening where Oxfam does not have the comparative advantage. To complement this, Oxfam needs to be clear about the areas where it adds genuine value through its own non-financial support. This clarity is essential for planning the appropriate level of effort and ensuring the right internal capacities are in place to support partners effectively.

- **Consider how the ISI approach could have been integrated earlier** alongside program delivery.[37] A phased approach could be adopted where institutional strengthening could focus on critical and essential elements early on in an emergency response and in a more targeted manner resolving immediate institutional strengthening needs linked with delivering interventions effectively (e.g., financial management, sharing of technical know-how, support to MEAL); moving towards a partnership-centered institutional strengthening plan through more structured financial and non-financial support as a crisis becomes more protracted; and over time to more joint and in-depth capacity assessments and longer-term institutional strengthening ambitions. In particular, consider how, with a longer timeline, more joint capacity assessment could lead to greater institutional strengthening impact for partners.

- **Document the management approach and style of the partnership-centered response** as a key learning. The approach to day-to-day management of the response was identified as a key enabler throughout this learning review. Oxfam should document how it translated and applied its learning and adaptive approach to the response as well as how feminist principles informed the management approach to allow LHL and partnership principles to be put in practice by Oxfam staff with partners.

- **Consider further how Oxfam should and could share power on more strategic decisions** with organizations it partners with.

- **Rebuild visibility on program quality and outcomes within a partnership-centered model.** Establish a joint program quality framework co-defined with partners – including what "quality" means in each context and develop guidance on how to apply humanitarian standards through an LHL and feminist lens, ensuring quality without imposing top-down control.

- Oxfam could further reflect on how to engage partner organizations on their program quality, including who to engage with and who holds the relationship on program quality. Partnership-centered responses could approach program quality through a process of co-defining what it means for specific partners in their specific context and setting joint aspirations for program quality and outcomes. Oxfam could also consider adopting a much more joint monitoring approach to program quality, shifting from a process that reinforces power dynamics to one that shares power.

- **Reflect on Oxfam's positionality in a partnership-centered response – not as a donor but based on a principle of complementarity and added value** – considering how Oxfam aims to lend its expertise and knowledge, grounded in LHL and feminist ways of working, to be an active contributor within the partnership. Oxfam could explore and reflect with strategic partners in Ukraine whether and how Oxfam could have better supported partners with program quality and outcomes. This would require discussions with program implementers, not with organizations' management. It would also require partners to be open and vulnerable on how they see their program implementation.

- **Address the fragmentation of a response where individual partners design programs.** Consider how the fragmentation could be mitigated in future responses by facilitating greater collaboration across partners on specific sectoral approaches, allowing diversity of interventions while being more strategic on how these diverse approaches connect and reinforce each other. This is where Oxfam can complement and add value to the partnership-centered response and enable a more strategic approach to an otherwise fragmented response.

- **Define what success looks like according to LHL and feminist principles and integrate this within a structured MEAL approach.** Consider how defining success needs to reflect both the process of partnering (how Oxfam partners according to LHL and feminist principles) and the end objective (what impact and outcome Oxfam's partnerships lead to). Reflect on the timeline of impact, considering how the value of LHL and feminist principles translate beyond humanitarian objectives into recovery, governance, development as well as resilience objectives. Given Oxfam's mission and vision, longer-term impacts beyond humanitarian outcomes should be considered in defining the success of implementing LHL and feminist commitments.

- **Conduct a post-exit evaluation or learning review** focused on documenting the impact of the ISI on partners' organizations sustainability and their institutional strengthening plans. An appropriate timeline could be to conduct such an exercise in Summer 2027.

Recommendations for organizations that partnered with Oxfam

- **Share your experience** with other local and national actors in particular through the Alliance of Ukrainian CSOs to demonstrate how partnerships can work differently and better serve local and national actors.

- **Reflect on power, positionality and develop internal practices for how you engage with international partners**, ensuring you exercise leadership, co-design, influence including through advocating with international organizations you partner with to learn, adapt and adopt the positive practices you experienced with Oxfam. This includes proactively expressing the leadership role you intend to hold in the partnership and confidently voicing disagreement when program design or key decisions drift away from partnership-centered approaches.

- **Reflect critically** on your journey and role in the partnership with Oxfam, including where opportunities may have been missed to strengthen impact for the population you aim to support.

- **Collaborate with other** local and national actors in Ukraine to address increasing competition within the sector – displaying, through practice, how collective action and cooperation can strengthen outcomes for affected populations.
- **Influence coordination and decision-making systems** including through advocating for operational systems that use local languages, take into account local realities, reduce barriers to participation.

Recommendations for Donors

- **Learn from Oxfam's experience in Ukraine**, particularly how it demonstrated the low-risk outcome of contextualized and relevant due diligence and compliance processes, and the critical impact of partners' leadership on response relevance and inclusive humanitarian outcomes.

- **Consider how elements of funding can be key enablers of the partnership-centered response** in Ukraine, in particular the ability of Oxfam to approve changes in partners' budget and interventions within broad parameters without prior approval from donors. This was a critical enabler of a response that was more relevant, adaptive to changing needs and responsive to new emergencies.

- **Review requirements to incentivize good quality, complementary and equitable partnerships**, including by rethinking value for money through more qualitative indicators in MEAL framework, such as trust and inclusion. This should also include recognizing and adequately resourcing partnership building functions to support intermediaries in embedding LHL principles and ensuring the relational elements that are critical to good-quality and equitable partnerships.

- **Dedicate funding to institutional strengthening**, including by funding intermediaries' staff capacities to ensure the provision of non-financial support and by enabling and making compulsory the provision of ICR.

- **Require partners' co-leadership in proposal design and allocate sufficient budget to resource partner leadership roles meaningfully, including within coordination spaces**.

- **Reconsider how scale is used as a measure of success**. Donors should recognize the importance of depth, relevance, and reaching the most vulnerable as measures of success more equally alongside rapid expansion of interventions and adjust expectations accordingly.

Recommendations for humanitarian actors wanting to adopt partnership-centered response

- **Consider how to replicate the enablers of the partnership-centered response** within your organizations including:
  - Having clear commitments and principles on LHL and elements of the feminist principles in your policies.
  - Translating these commitments through senior leadership management, with LHL informed job descriptions, through clear performance expectations and supported by structured on-boarding, guidance, training and dedicated staff.
  - Focus on the relational aspects of adapting processes, tools and ways of working with partners, understanding how requirements can be contextualized and made more relevant to partners' ways of working including through for instance using joint problem solving, innovative approaches to reporting (e.g., oral reporting); taking on the burden of filling forms.
  - Create awareness across staff of their power and positionality, and of ways to mitigate these in order to shift and share power with partner organizations.

- **Ensure your approach to institutional strengthening integrates targeted and tailored non-financial support** and partnership-centered institutional strengthening plans, while also being clear about where in-house capacities or expertise do not exist and enabling partners to access external support through the financial support.

Recommendations for humanitarian system reset

- **Build from the experience of the partnership-centered response in Ukraine to reimagine different roles for international actors** based on the principles of complementarity and stepping back.

- **Ensure that where partnerships are formed they do not only reward the largest national and local actors but considers intentionally and carefully the need to support a diverse set of actors** to support an inclusive and complementary ecosystem of response at national and local levels.

- **Consider more radical approaches to locally relevant humanitarian coordination.** Humanitarian coordination systems should be designed, shaped by local and national actors including, where relevant, local authorities and governments. Humanitarian coordination should start with what already exists in the context and build in complementarity with these existing systems. Humanitarian coordination should ensure its relevance through jointly identifying with local and national actors including, where relevant, local authorities and governments, the focus of coordination as defined by what these actors need rather than what the international humanitarian system needs from it.

- **Ensure that current hyper-prioritization does not lead to the exclusion of marginalized population groups and the defunding of organizations representing them** including WROs, organizations of people with disability, LGBTQIA+ organizations and those working with vulnerable groups.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: LEARNING REVIEW OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

Objective 1: Review Oxfam's internal structures, processes and culture and analyze if and how they have enabled partnership-centered and localisation approaches in the Ukraine response, as well as identifying internal barriers to implementation of the Ukraine response strategy

1. To what extent has the internal change process and revised team structure – and LHL principles/ values – enabled partnership-centered ways of working and implementation of the Ukraine response strategy? Do we have the right skills, capacity and attitude within the Oxfam team to deliver LHL and partnership-based approaches?
2. To what extent have Oxfam's internal systems and processes enabled partnership-centered ways of working and implementation of the Ukraine response strategy?
3. What are the positive learnings and challenges in adapting Oxfam's systems to enable a partnership-centered / LHL approach?
4. How has Oxfam's approach to risk sharing with partners evolved and what have been the implications for trust and equity in the partnership?

Objective 2: Review Oxfam's financial and non-financial support to partners and assess the impact of this support in relation to local humanitarian leadership as experienced by partners

1. What have been the successes and challenges of the institutional strengthening program with partners and how effective have these efforts been so far in enabling partners' leadership and sustainability?
2. How is Oxfam utilizing its knowledge and expertise to enable and facilitate partners' access to diverse funding? What have been the successes and challenges so far?
3. How is Oxfam enabling meaningful access and active participation of partners in coordination and decision-making spaces? What have been the successes and challenges so far? Do partners feel they have influence in these spaces?

Objective 3: Review enabling factors and challenges for program quality, scale, timeliness, effectiveness, relevance and inclusivity in a partnership-centered program delivery model, in alignment with sector and global standards and principles, and rights-based approaches

1. Was the response up to scale to meet the needs and number of people affected by the crisis based on guidance set out in "Oxfam's Commitments and Expectations"?
2. Did the response enable/support the partners to engage actively with Sectors/Clusters (or other existing coordination mechanisms) in coordinating their interventions?
3. Did the programs align with humanitarian principles and meet the global humanitarian standards articulated in the Sphere Humanitarian Standards and uphold human dignity, including the Core Humanitarian Standard?
4. To what extent did the programs ensure the inclusion of vulnerable people and marginalized communities within Ukraine, both in terms of reaching vulnerable communities and their role in decision-making?
5. How did programs adapt and respond based on the changing context, needs, priorities and feedback from affected communities? What is the perception on the quality and responsiveness of programs based on affected community perspectives? What were enabling and challenging factors for this?
6. How effective and relevant was Oxfam's program support to partners, particularly in terms of enabling transfer of know-how and carving space for mutual learning?

Objective 4: Examine Oxfam's partnership approaches and assess how successfully Oxfam is building and maintaining equal partnerships grounded in feminist principles, building on learnings from the previous partnership learning review

1. To what extent do partners perceive that Oxfam's partnership practices reflect equality, mutual respect, and shared accountability? Can you provide examples of how partners' leadership has been recognized or supported? What were blockers and enablers that were experienced?
2. How have power dynamics between Oxfam and partners shifted over the course of the response, and what mechanisms supported or hindered this shift? How does this compare with experiences partners had working with other international partners and the wider response?
3. What indicators of success or approaches is Oxfam using to measure the success of partnership-centered approaches? What are these measurements telling us?
4. How do partners perceive the relevance of these measurement tools based on their priorities and their effectiveness in capturing and driving progress on LHL?
5. In what ways is the Oxfam Ukraine response putting Oxfam's feminist principles into practice—such as sharing power, championing diversity, ensuring safety, and supporting feminist movements? What examples illustrate these efforts, and what challenges or tensions have emerged in doing so?

ANNEX 2: OXFAM'S LHL COMMITMENTS, PARTNERSHIPS AND FEMINIST PRINCIPLES

Partnership principles[38]:
- Shared vision and values
- Complementarity of value added and purpose
- Autonomy and independence
- Transparency and mutual accountability
- Clarity on roles and responsibilities
- Commitment to joint learning

LHL commitments:
- **Principled and effective partnerships:** Recognizing and increasing power of local and national actors and contributes to addressing power imbalances inherent to the humanitarian system.
- Increased quantity and quality of funding for locally led humanitarian work: Incudes efforts by Oxfam to increase Local actors' access to flexible humanitarian funds, as well as Oxfam brokering direct contact between local actors and donors and avoiding additional compliance conditions added than those imposed by the donor.
- **Strengthening local humanitarian response capacities** by building on and complementing existing local and national capacity.
- **Participation of crisis affected people**: Entails Oxfam following the lead of crisis affected people, ensuring their participation in decision-making and work together as partners in humanitarian programming.
- **Inclusive and diverse coordination and collaborative platforms**: Efforts by Oxfam promote the leadership of local/national actors through humanitarian coordination. Visibility of local actors: Recognizing and promoting the role and work of local actors in emergencies in a way that contributes to local actors' visibility, brand, and capacity for fundraising, communications, and advocacy.
- **Influencing and shaping the humanitarian system**: Includes local to global efforts to develop strong policy and advocacy strategies to influence the policies and practices of donors, UN, governments and INGOs that undermines the roles of national and local actors.

Feminist Approach:

It means that we want to be **inclusive**. This is a way of working that seeks to **challenge and address the root causes of structural and systemic inequalities** and transform systems of power and privilege, many of which are grounded in social constructions of gender and patriarchy. Central to this approach is the concept of **power, status, and identity**. It should begin with the self and work towards social **justice. By committing to feminist leadership and practices, we can enable our goals and ways of working to be transformative and bold in advancing equality between people**. A feminist approach necessitates us **examining our power and how we use it both internally and externally**. And we will have to be prepared to **let go of some of that power** (Oxfam International, 2025b).

Feminist principles[39]:

- **I share power**: Be aware of the advantages and privilege some people/groups have over others due to social inequality (gender, race, sexual identity, class, standard of education) and how this can lead to unequal power. Challenge organizational culture and social norms that contribute to the power imbalance experienced by women – particularly Black and women of color and younger women.
- **I challenge my behavior**: Recognize that challenging sexism, racism or any oppressive ideology, begins with challenging yourself. It's important we look at our own conscious and unconscious bias and play an active part in correcting the inequalities that exist in our society.
- **I support the feminist movement**: Acknowledge the feminist activists and their organizations already having a huge impact and take care that our actions/policies don't undermine, duplicate, appropriate or overlook their work. Recognize our responsibility, as an international organization, to promote gender equality in partnership with activists and WROs.
- **Nothing about us without us**: As an organization working on women's rights, Oxfam can unintentionally take up the space of WROs. Oxfam aims to be on an equal footing with its partners, creating spaces for their own voices and experiences to be heard.
- **Feminism is for everyone**: Society's unfair gender roles and stereotypes negatively impact all of us and it is up to all of us to dismantle this patriarchy. Remember that feminism is not about one gender coming out 'on top.' It is about equality.
- **There is no justice without gender justice**: The issues of economic, social and environmental justice that Oxfam works on can never be resolved without gender justice. Social and economic progression are interlinked and require the full participation, freedom and recognition of all.
- **I champion diversity**: Encourage diversity and challenge any discrimination you might witness. There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle and our approach is intersectional, which means that we understand that prejudices often overlap e.g. on average Black, Asian and minority ethnic women not only earn less than white men, but also white women.
- **I value safety**: Every person working for or with Oxfam has the right to a safe environment. No form of abuse, sexual, racist or otherwise, will ever be tolerated. This applies in both physical and online spaces. Our staff can feel safe to report any incidences of abuse or bullying - we have a zero tolerance on no action for all cases reported and will ensure that all appropriate actions are taken. For Oxfam, safety should not just be a priority but a way of life.
- **I want a supportive environment**: Actively work towards a supportive environment by taking care of your emotional and physical wellbeing and encouraging others to do the same.
- **I believe in freedom of expression**: Embrace the freedom of yourself and others to articulate opinions and ideas without the need for approval or fear of retaliation. While no form of discrimination will be tolerated at Oxfam, we must all support each other in our continued learning as intersectional feminist allies.
- **Eliminate gender-based violence**: Oxfam sees gender-based violence as one of the most prevalent violations of human rights worldwide. Work in partnership with feminist and women's rights organizations, young people and men, as a way of fighting the social norms that foster and normalize violence.

ENDNOTES

1   According to UNHCR's Operational Data Portal, updated 3 October 2025 (UNHCR, 2025).

2   According to the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025, published April 2025 (OCHA, 2025).

3   Oxfam's seven strategic partners include: Gay Alliance Ukraine (GAU), Peaceful Heaven of Kharkiv (PHK), Charitable Foundation Rokada, Shchedryk, The Tenth of April (TTA), Voice of Romni (VoR), Women's Consortium of Ukraine (WCU).

4   The WHLF's first phase ran from March to August 2025, with a second phase planned from November 2025, focusing on women-led and feminist leadership in humanitarian action. The WHLF is inspired from similar funds Oxfam already implements in development settings to support WROs and WLOs leadership. The WHLF in Ukraine consists of fully flexible funding provided to WROs and WLOs with the purpose to enable these organisations to fulfil their core mandate.

5   Only 11% of partners felt this was a problem but it remained the third highest ranked challenge.

6   According to UNHCR's Operational Data Portal, updated 3 October 2025 (UNHCR, 2025).

7   According to the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025, published April 2025 (OCHA, 2025).

8   Partners here refers to the organizations that became strategic partners of Oxfam since 2024. These organizations are local and national Ukrainian organizations and have worked in partnership with Oxfam since 2022. Partners is used a shorthand to refer to these organizations.

9   This approach is also aligned with Oxfam's Presence Decision-Making Policy, which states that responses in countries where Oxfam does not have an established presence should, by default, be partner-led.

10   For example, OCHA estimates that the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Ukraine (~US $3.107 billion) is about 78 % funded as of the latest tracked data (FTS, 2024a), compared to significantly lower coverage levels for other major crises—around 69 % in Sudan (FTS, 2024b), 60 % in Yemen (FTS, 2024c), 53 % in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FTS, 2024d), and 52 % in Afghanistan (FTS, 2024e). In 2022, Ukraine was the largest recipient of Humanitarian funding (DI, 2023).

11   CBOs were registered NGOs, often as charitable foundations.

12   This approach is guided by Oxfam's Partnership and Local Humanitarian Leadership Principles (Oxfam America, 2020), which emphasise equitable partnerships, quality funding, local capacity strengthening, participation of crisis-affected people, inclusive coordination, visibility of local actors, and influencing the humanitarian system.

13   While the WHLF is mentioned in this learning review, it is not the focus of this learning review. A separate learning process exists focused on the WHLF. For more, see: https://womenleadersukraine.oxfam.org/

14   For more information see https://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam-in-action/women-equality/womens-rights-fund/

15   CAPAS is a One Oxfam partnership approach that helps Oxfam teams and partners engage in empowering conversations to jointly assess the potential, opportunities, risk, power dynamics and achievements of their partnership throughout the partnership cycle.

16   Due diligence passporting refers to the process by which an organization (such as Oxfam) recognises and accepts the due diligence assessments already conducted by another trusted entity (usually another INGO or by a donor) rather than repeating the full review.

17 Particularly for the WHLF partner organizations.

18 Other DEC recipient signed multi-year funding agreements within the same circumstances demonstrating that cascading multi-year funding could have been done by Oxfam.

19 For example, others INGOs in the Ukraine Response supported partners at the frontline with support to develop organizational evacuation plans with clear triggers, ensured there was budget for First aid kits, body armour and car radios, and paid for membership of INSO to receive daily security updates (KII Oxfam).

20 The learning review notes that a fully articulated risk-sharing approach would however include consistent dialogue spaces, shared frameworks, or embedded structures (e.g., in job descriptions or systems) to support a common operational understanding of risk sharing.

21 Evidence that those risks are jointly identified, jointly mitigated when possible and jointly monitored.

22 This came relatively late in the response; by contrast, other DEC members had offered partners a 10% ICR from the outset, together with dedicated budget and support for security risk management and staff wellbeing (KII Oxfam).

23 Once again, high funding availability and explicit leadership support allowed staff to invest the necessary time and attention in relationships rather than procedural enforcement, creating a uniquely enabling environment for partnership in Ukraine.

24 Following targeted attraction and retention measures - including flexible pay and adaptable working arrangements - the new structure was fully resourced, voluntary turnover dropped to nearly zero by September 2025.

25 Most by August 2025, at the end of partner-led programs.

26 Program quality was not incorporated into the ISI, as the scale-down of Oxfam's technical roles was a deliberate choice to shift from program-focused support toward institutional strengthening and to prioritise resources for partners rather than for Oxfam's technical functions (Oxfam Ukraine Response, 2025).

27 For example, Save the Children's Organizational Capacity Development (OCD) guidance provides a partner-led approach to capacity analysis, demonstrating that formal assessments can be designed in ways that reinforce partner leadership rather than impose INGO-driven diagnostics (Save the Children, 2022).

28 A study led by Oxfam identified that the organizations showed 'continued adaptation as needs evolved' enabled by direct community connections which facilitated response programming (Greener, 2024). The evaluation of the partner-led response in Poland highlighted similar findings judging Oxfam's response to be 'highly relevant, aligned with the urgent needs of refugees, particularly women and marginalized groups' (Ziss, 2024). This was further highlighted in the first learning review (Humanitarian Impact Institute, 2024; Oxfam International, 2024).

29 The Washington Group (WG) Short Set is a set of questions designed to identify people with functional limitations. This tool is used in humanitarian responses to identify people with disabilities.

30 One partner also reported being able to develop new sectoral expertise on livelihoods expanding from their food security work to enable longer-term support and sustainable solutions.

31 Oxfam's 2025 commitments and expectations provides key benchmarks for Oxfam to achieve when responding to humanitarian crises. This document states that Oxfam should 'aim to reach between 10% (slow onset) and 25% (rapid onset) of the population affected and in need of humanitarian assistance' (Oxfam International, 2025b). The document recognises that in some contexts this may be challenging.

32 In 2025, with the implementation of the new strategy, the partner-led response moved away from program delivery to institutional strengthening. This is why data on program reach in 2025 is not presented in this analysis.

33 Oxfam's 2025 commitments and expectations highlight that Oxfam should *'Ensure the quality of Oxfam and its partner's services or goods that communities benefit from is high and meeting sectoral standards […] We carry out protection analyses, gender analyses, gender and power analyse as well as gender and conflict analyses in all fragile contexts. Those analyses inform our interventions and approaches'* (Oxfam International, 2025b).

34 Findings from the DEC scoping study (Harrison, 2023) also echo this finding.

35 Narratives around the war in Ukraine and the humanitarian response have created a sense of exceptionalism and led to double standards in response (see Hargrave et al., 2024).

36 See for instance Barbelet et al. (2021).

37 The learning review acknowledges that partner organizations were not always keen to focus on institutional strengthening in the midst of responding to urgent needs and that dedicated capacity strengthening budget lines were granted to partners from the onset of the response. However, these were often unused partly due to less dedicated and intentional dialogue between Oxfam and partners on jointly considering how these budget lines could be best utilised.

38 For more on Oxfam's partnership principles see Oxfam International (2012).

39 See Oxfam GB (n.d.).

OXFAM