Executive Summary

OXFAM SENSE MAKING EXERCISE
FOR A SELECTION OF EVALUATIONS 2013-2014

1. Purpose
This document is a review of a sample of evaluations carried out between January 2013 and October 2014, conducted to meet the requirement of Oxfam’s policy of program evaluation. The review serves both accountability and learning functions. It is meant to help Oxfam identify strengths/weaknesses and lessons from our programs, explore how our efforts to enable good program design are improving (or not) our programming and assess our evaluation quality. While this report tries to balance strengths and weaknesses, it is driven by learning, so it inevitably focuses more on what needs improvement or requires action. This report aimed to serve internal program audiences; it is shared now, in keeping with Oxfam’s commitment to accountability.

2. Methodology
From more than 400 evaluations, the secretariat only had access to 207 documents (in spite of sustained and repeated efforts to obtain copies); this represents a serious knowledge management problem. Not one of the affiliates was able to provide access to all the evaluations that they themselves had commissioned. Of those 207 documents, 176 were deemed eligible for review. Each evaluation was assigned to a change goal category and 33 volunteer reviewers, two colleagues from the secretariat and two consultants reviewed 127 evaluations in total. Each reviewer looked at key outcomes, and gathered input on Oxfam’s ways of working (e.g. added value, accountability, influencing, attention to women’s rights etc.), and commented on methodological quality.

Since the previous meta-review of the last strategic plan, Demanding Justice, the number and quality of evaluations has improved significantly. Overall, evaluations were fairly strong, written in accessible language, and offered useful recommendations based on the evidence. Nonetheless, the majority of evaluations had some methodological issues, so this remains an area that needs improvement.

3. Key Findings: What the evaluations tell us about the nature of Oxfam programing
These findings are drawn from the six change goal chapters, where more detail about key achievements and challenges under each change goal can be found, along with specific findings regarding Oxfam’s ways of working as it pertains to each change goal.

A. Programing is largely aligned with the priorities and strategies identified in the strategic plan.
Oxfam is working with others to improve the capacity of citizens to demand their rights and hold government officials accountable for essential services; build the capacity of a range of CSOs organizations, especially women’s rights and producer organizations, to be more effective; improve the quality of its own and others’ emergency response and disaster risk reduction programs, and increase the resilience and productivity of small producers. There is notable progress in some areas, initial advances in others, and some hard lessons about the challenges of working on complex issues in resource

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constrained and politicized or restrictive contexts. However, the strategic plan appears to be a solid foundation for decision-making on strategy and direction.

B. Understanding and capacity to execute a rights-based approach has matured. Oxfam continues strategic support to civil society organizations so that rights-holders more effectively claim their rights, but this work is more frequently complemented by engagement with duty-bearers so they not only feel the pressure to respond, but also have increased capacity to do so. This is evident across change goals.

C. More national level influencing, but Worldwide Influencing Network (WIN) still a work in progress. Influencing is present in the majority of programs evaluated and takes many forms: from traditional Oxfam global campaigns, to regional initiatives linked to national legal reform; training of duty-bearers that allows for better access to justice and promotion of women’s rights; better budget monitoring around essential services; and more say regarding extractive industries; to modelling “good” humanitarian practice in the hopes of influencing by example. More national level influencing has presented a number of challenges as Oxfam grapples with local politics and power structures, shrinking political space for civil society organizations (CSOs), on-going capacity and revenue issues that plague governmental authorities and impede progress regardless of level of action, among others. Though both Oxfam and partners have had some successes, the articulation of a holistic model that integrates influencing from global to local or vice versa remains an on-going challenge.

D. Relevance of the one program approach (OPA): re-examining it in practical terms. The one program approach posits that Oxfam will have greatest impact if it links long-term development, campaigning, and humanitarian assistance, including work on disaster risk reduction. Disaster risk reduction programs most closely embodied the OPA (although they don’t necessarily use the terminology) as they generally combined work with local authorities, livelihood resilience strategies and disaster preparedness. Overall, fewer than 15 per cent of evaluations mentioned OPA and many of those that did understood it as development projects with some influencing or influencing with some other activities such as training and exchanges. OPA is included in Oxfam Program Standards, so this merits some re-examination; Oxfam may be missing opportunities or critical synergies.

E. Progress on placing women’s rights “at the heart of all we do,” but stronger focus on full range of women’s rights is needed. As compared to the review of the previous strategic plan, there is evidence of a significantly greater focus on women. Of the change goals, Gender Justice programs were more explicitly interested in promoting a range of women’s rights and addressing inequities and power imbalances. Under other change goals, women’s rights work tended to focus on the issue of women’s participation – either reaching more female beneficiaries and/or increasing their participation in programs, committees, and other public settings. Sustainable Food Systems was quite successful in this regard, with over two thirds of the evaluations reviewed documenting increases in women’s participation, with a subset of those evaluations demonstrating higher levels of agency, empowerment, and/or economic benefits. The focus on women was much less consistent under other change goals and programs often demonstrated some level of gender awareness, but fell short of gender mainstreaming based on a strong gender analysis. Very few evaluations looked at women’s empowerment at the household level and findings there were mixed. In short, there seems to have been considerable acceptance of the idea of putting women’s rights at the heart of all Oxfam does, but still limitations and challenges in terms of what this means in practice.

F. Oxfam not maximizing its potential to add value. Only about one third of evaluations discussed Oxfam’s added value either explicitly or implicitly. This type of assessment should be incorporated more routinely in our evaluations to have a more solid foundation to inform our choices as Oxfam moves further
into new roles in our change process. Where discussed, Oxfam is widely recognized for its expertise and capacity in humanitarian response and campaigning and advocacy. In many cases, partners and allies want more from Oxfam in terms of peer learning and exchange opportunities, specialized training, a more effective coordinating and/or convening role, and better oversight and support during program implementation.

G. The prevalence of capacity building in Oxfam-funded projects and programs. In reviewing the full set of evaluations, it became evident that capacity building is a part of many program strategies, yet it receives very little evaluative attention. This may warrant more attention as there is currently no way to judge the degree to which capacity building investments are useful.

Challenges to Achieving More
The following challenges came up a sufficient number of times to warrant more reflection and, in some cases, additional study or research. These are:

- Ambition-capacity mismatch: This was evident in numerous evaluations and was a function of some combination of overly ambitious goals, unrealistic timeline, lack of resources, poor understanding of contextual difficulties, and lack of capacity for partners and Oxfam. This was further exacerbated by some problems of inadequate scale and duration of investment.
- The “translation problem” where change in one domain or level does not necessarily translate to change in other domains or levels. This is evident in women’s empowerment programming where women may become more active in the community, but still lack any decision-making role at the household level; in DRR planning at the local level, that is hindered or undermined by lack of support at the municipal or provincial level; or changes in men’s attitudes about VAW, but limited or no change in their behaviors.
- Uneven attention to sustainability that manifests in a variety of ways, such as attention to budget monitoring, but lack of attention to revenue generation; inadequate strategies for leaving installed human capacity; lack of attention to financial sustainability of partners; and too many livelihood programs (especially in the food systems change goal) that don’t have strong economic outcomes, undermining their long-term viability.
- Lack of attention to cost-effectiveness (a problem which was identified in the previous sense-making review) and no way to make judgments about the relative value of investments within programs, much less across programs. In a confederation context, with funding held across different systems, this is not an easy problem to solve. Nonetheless, given the current debate about aid effectiveness and the continued push for value for money, Oxfam really needs to address this challenge.
- Siloed thinking and limited cross-fertilization amongst change goals, thereby failing to build on strengths and capitalize on assets and good practices, such as strong gender analysis in Gender Justice, standard setting and accountability in Saving Lives, and experience learned about working in highly restrictive political contexts and/or controversial issues in Right to be Heard.

4. Oxfam is getting results, but is it having an impact?
The weight of the evidence makes a plausible case that Oxfam interventions are making a difference, although perhaps not always on the scale or in the timeframe originally envisaged. Among the methodological issues Oxfam needs to continue to work on, a number have direct bearing on whether Oxfam will be able to make claims about progress toward its change objectives by 2019. These are 1) the continued lack of baseline data or ‘beginning-state’ information for most programs; 2) the failure to document the reach of the programs and whether they hit their targets; 3) the tendency of evaluations to limit themselves to outputs or short-term outcomes and a failure to contextualize outcomes in a clear theory of change or by using comparison groups and 4) spotty evidence or insufficient independent
verification, and 5) very limited analysis at the level of individuals in communities or households, where ultimately Oxfam seeks to have an impact.

5. Conclusions
The strategic plan appears to be providing adequate guidance for funding priorities and evaluations indicate that Oxfam is investing in most of the commitments embodied in the plan. Oxfam continues to mature as a rights-based organization, has strengthened and expanded its influencing efforts at the national level, continues to build the capacity of civil society actors to hold duty bearers to account and increasingly supports duty-bearers to develop the capacity to respond, and has advanced considerably in promoting women’s participation and engagement, although more work needs to be done on gender equality. The evidence also highlights a number of areas where Oxfam could potentially contribute to the sector with its program informed knowledge and/or which merit further exploration. Oxfam supports complex, systemic change under difficult circumstances and many of the challenges it faces stem from this fact.

6. Recommendations
A. Big picture
- It may be opportune to begin thinking about how change goals should be formulated in the future. For example, the breadth of the natural resources change goal is quite problematic in terms of speaking about Oxfam’s contributions to outcomes in this area. At the same time, the evaluators saw a great deal of overlap in the programs assigned to different change goals, along with lack of cross-fertilization amongst change goals. This suggests that there is a process of convergence going on that is not yet reflected in how Oxfam talks about or categorizes its work and may mean that Oxfam isn’t fully capitalizing on potential synergies.
- The one program approach is a core standard and something of an article of faith, yet it does not seem to have been embraced in practice. This either doesn’t matter or Oxfam is significantly under-performing – in any event, it is worth examining.
- Oxfam’s ability to manage external relations, especially with partners, also seems to be uneven. This affects both program quality and potentially the Oxfam brand. Oxfam should pay more attention to how it wants partners to experience the relationship, be more intentional on delivering consistent added value, and more routinely solicit honest feedback from a wider range of stakeholders in its evaluations and through other mechanisms.

B. Program
- Tackle a limited set of recurring “program knots” (e.g. the translation problem, moving beyond women’s participation to changing power relations) and develop explicit strategies to address them (we’ve seen, as the result of this review, that Oxfam can make progress when it sets its mind to it). A key element of this will be learning across change goals (see next section).
- As an organization committed to being more than a funder, Oxfam needs to engage more consistently and think more strategically about each component of the program cycle (planning, implementation, embedded M&E) and invest time, funds and human resources to deliver on that commitment, especially for struggling or at-risk partners or those engaged in complex, collaborative endeavors or coalitions.
- Continue to develop more consistency and quality in monitoring and evaluation practice. Lessons can be learned from Saving Lives in terms of developing, widely adopting, and applying shared standards and indices.

7. Implications of this Exercise for Greater Accountability, Learning and Impact
This report cannot begin to do justice to the content and lessons found in the evaluations and what they represent in terms of Oxfam’s and partners’ commitment to finding ways forward to deal with the complex political and practical issues in their daily work. One of Oxfam’s currencies is knowledge and we want to highlight that Oxfam is significantly under-exploiting a wealth of knowledge and experience. There is enormous potential for capitalizing on this knowledge to improve program quality and contribute to the broader (I)NGO sector through in-depth, cross-program, cross-change goal reviews, discussions, peer learning, supported by a research agenda. Examples include:

- Programs in Right to Be Heard have gained significant experience with advocacy in restricted political contexts that is worth sharing more broadly. It also grapples with how to ensure that policy victories translate into change in people’s lives. The latter is an issue across change goals, where some inroads have been made, which can be usefully explored.
- Many of the programs under Gender Justice use a sophisticated conceptual framework that seeks to analyze the roots of resource and power differential between men and women and guide programs to push for transformative change. This framework can be applied not only to gender relations, but also to other characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, any and all of which can be the basis of discrimination. As Oxfam ramps up its work on inequality, the groundwork the Gender Justice team has done may be quite useful.
- Under a number of change goals, Oxfam has engaged with local authorities to both collaborate on common goals and influence future action (and certainly Oxfam Italy has given the matter a great deal of thought). There are many thorny issues – financing, capacity, turnover in government personnel, and political dynamics – that emerge in the course of such collaborations and many problems could be avoided or mitigated if knowledge was exchanged and broadly shared on this issue.
- There is certainly widespread gender awareness under all the change goals, with targeting of women and efforts to enhance their participation. This might be considered a first stage benchmark in putting women’s rights at the center of Oxfam’s work, but is also the stage at which many programs get stalled. At the same time, there are some stand-out programs that have worked toward transformative change under Sustainable Food, Saving Lives, etc. Further learning on mechanisms and techniques that equip non-gender experts to take on the daunting task of challenging cultural and political norms and practices would help advance gender mainstreaming.

Over the same period that is covered by this exercise, MEL colleagues across the confederation have worked hard to put building blocks in place in order to improve our evaluations. As this exercise reveals, Oxfam colleagues continue to struggle with some fundamental problems, such as putting baselines in place, effective monitoring for program and project implementation, and the over-reliance on either purely qualitative or quantitative methodologies. MEL colleagues will be examining this report, and the evaluations that informed it, to continue to improve our practice. Methodical work over time, combined with close accompaniment from MEL colleagues, will focus our efforts on the key necessary improvements. We are highly motivated by the potential and imperative of becoming a knowledge-driven organization.