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# Still learning: a critical reflection on three years of measuring women's empowerment in Oxfam

David Bishop and Kimberly Bowman

*In 2011, as part of a broader effort to understand organisational effectiveness, a team within Oxfam GB began implementing impact evaluations on a small sample of projects largely focused on women's empowerment. The resulting 'Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews' employ a quasi-experimental evaluation design, and have been undertaken in more than a dozen sites over three years. This article briefly presents the Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews and their short history, then focuses on five key areas where the approach has presented limitations. Acknowledging that there remains room for improvement, the project has also been a major step forward for Oxfam's monitoring, evaluation, and learning practice. Through this critical reflection, we aim to share some learning to date.*

*En 2011, como parte de un esfuerzo más amplio dirigido a comprender la eficacia organizacional, un equipo interno de Oxfam gb llevó a cabo varias evaluaciones acerca del impacto obtenido por una pequeña muestra de proyectos centrados fundamentalmente en el empoderamiento de las mujeres. Utilizando un diseño cuasiexperimental para implementar dichas evaluaciones, las "revisiones sobre la eficacia del empoderamiento de mujeres" resultantes fueron aplicadas en más de una decena de lugares durante un período de tres años. De manera breve, el presente artículo da cuenta de estas revisiones y de su corta historia, así como también de las cinco áreas clave en las que este enfoque encontró limitaciones. Si bien aún debe mejorarse, el proyecto constituye un importante paso hacia adelante para las funciones de monitoreo, evaluación y aprendizaje de Oxfam. A través de esta reflexión crítica, los autores comparten algunos de los aprendizajes obtenidos hasta la fecha.*

*En 2011, dans le cadre d'un effort élargi en vue de comprendre l'efficacité organisationnelle, une équipe d'Oxfam GB a commencé à mettre en œuvre des évaluations de l'impact sur un petit échantillon de projets portant principalement sur l'autonomisation des femmes. Les Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews (Examens de l'efficacité de l'autonomisation des femmes) qui en ont résulté utilisent une conception quasi-expérimentale de l'évaluation, et ont été entrepris dans plus de douze sites sur une période de trois ans. Cet article présente brièvement les Women's*

*Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews et leur brève histoire, puis se concentre sur cinq domaines dans lesquels l'approche a présenté des limites. Reconnaisant qu'il reste encore des améliorations à apporter, le projet a aussi constitué un important pas en avant pour les pratiques de suivi, d'évaluation et d'apprentissage d'Oxfam. À travers cette réflexion critique, nous cherchons à diffuser quelques-uns des enseignements tirés jusqu'à présent.*

*Key words:* impact evaluation; empowerment; women's rights

## Introduction

Seen through the eyes of monitoring and evaluation specialists, 'women's empowerment' is both an inspiring and challenging concept. It is inspiring to consider the potential for evaluation to illustrate and support truly transformational but often hidden changes: women claiming and enjoying their rights, being able to make decisions about the direction of their lives, or beginning to access power denied to them. Empowerment is also deeply challenging from a measurement perspective – an abstract and contested concept boasting a range of sometimes-dry definitions. There are those who argue that any attempt to measure it is sure to disappoint someone, and certainly fail to capture its transformational elements. That said, evaluation advisors with Oxfam are committed to 'putting women's rights at the heart of everything we do'.<sup>1</sup>

In 2010, Oxfam GB's senior leadership team requested that the organisation's Programme Performance & Accountability Team develop a framework for understanding organisational performance.<sup>2</sup> Oxfam's programming is broad and diverse, but the leadership specifically instructed that an assessment of the effectiveness of programming aimed at empowering women be included within this framework.

Oxfam and others have previously discussed different design choices for organisational performance frameworks on the whole. Establishing such a framework is particularly tricky for organisations with very diverse or 'hard to measure' programming. Oxfam recognises that transformational empowerment involves the realisation of economic, social, and political rights that are often interdependent and reinforcing, and which women experience in different ways within personal, household, local community, and broader political spheres. Oxfam's programming often involves livelihoods approaches, using economic changes as an entry point to prompt other changes (including empowerment) in the social and political spheres.

The focus on women's rights and gender justice in Oxfam's work results from the understanding that gender inequality is both a cause of, and perpetuated by, poverty and suffering. Efforts to support women's empowerment cut across Oxfam's programming – from engaging men in ending violence against women to work on women's rights legislation at national and international levels.

Our understanding and definition of women's empowerment as a construct should necessarily drive the measurement approach. Academics, feminist activists, and gender and development practitioners have previously identified many challenges to measuring women's empowerment (notably Kabeer 1999); many of which have been borne out as Oxfam attempted to design a practical evaluation approach to measure changes in women's empowerment. First, definitional issues required resolution: should we define empowerment as a process, or as a state of being? As something that could be externally defined, or something which the person we are hoping to support in her empowerment process can – and should – judge for herself? Is empowerment a coherent but abstract concept (e.g. the ability to make strategic life choices), or something that can be judged by assessing a range of characteristics or smaller component parts?

Organisational requirements have also imposed challenges. Oxfam GB was seeking an approach that could be applied appropriately in a range of contexts, while also producing data that could be aggregated at cross-national or 'global' level, for use by senior managers and for donor reporting.<sup>3</sup> The aggregation demand posed considerable challenges for evaluating an area of programming where context is so critical. Economic, social, and political marginalisation of women plays out in radically different ways in different contexts, resulting in a wide variety of norms and practices which disempower women. Further complexity is added from the multiple other identities of women which create an experience of intersectional inequality which varies from woman to woman. Importantly, as readers will appreciate, change itself is extremely complex and messy to chart, particularly in relation to tracking shifts in power relations. Meaningful change can be slow, hidden, 'two-steps-forward-one-step-back'<sup>4</sup> – and like all issues of power, women's empowerment is intensely personal and politicised. With all this in mind, we needed an approach that was sufficiently precise to detect small changes which can accrue over time, while also appreciating the complexity of the issue to be measured.

Finally and crucially, limitations in programme monitoring and evaluation practice in some Oxfam projects reviewed meant that consistent and high-quality baseline information was not available. Therefore these impact evaluations have hitherto been exclusively ex-post, relying on attempts to recall baseline status by survey respondents.

This article aims to be a critical self-examination of our efforts to respond to these challenges, through developing and undertaking a series of impact evaluations on women's empowerment interventions, which were catalysed by Oxfam's implementation of its 'Global Performance Framework' in 2010. The article draws upon more than a dozen impact evaluations carried out in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa between 2011 and 2013. These evaluations – called Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews – were led by members of Oxfam GB's Programme Performance & Accountability Team, in collaboration with country programme teams, global and regional advisors, local non-government organisations

(NGOs) working in partnership with Oxfam, and external consultants and enumerators.<sup>5</sup>

As 'large *n*' (i.e. large sample) impact evaluations, the Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews have had, as their focus, programming that is delivered primarily at the household or community level. Perhaps predictably – bearing in mind the anti-poverty focus of many development interventions at household and community levels – the majority of programmes reviewed to date have been focused on women's economic empowerment through community-based livelihoods interventions. Interventions that aim to challenge unequal gender power relations at other levels, such as national or international policy work, are covered by a different, qualitative, evaluation design.

We believe that Oxfam is sincere about wanting to understand better its contribution to changes in women's lives and in gender power relations. We believe that these evaluations have been a major step forward – though the approach has involved trade-offs, and there remains room for improvement. Our aim now is to share our learning at this stage of the process.

In the rest of this article, we will briefly present the Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews, relate their short history, and then focus on five key areas where the tool has presented difficult limitations. We hope that through sharing Oxfam's practical experience – warts and all – we can make a meaningful contribution to the community of funders, evaluators, and development practitioners who see quality evaluation as a tool to support women's empowerment.

## Measuring women's empowerment – the tool

As stated above, the catalyst for developing a common approach to measuring the effectiveness of women's empowerment programming – in the form of the Women's Empowerment Index – was Oxfam's implementation of its 'Global Performance Framework' in 2010. The framework was designed to help the organisation better understand and demonstrate the scale and effectiveness of its work. Different NGOs have used a range of different approaches to respond to the 'results agenda', to drive improvements in organisational learning and to be more accountable to partners, allies, and donors.

Describing the complete performance framework is beyond the scope of this article (for more details, see Hughes and Hutchings 2011), but a large component of the framework involves impact evaluations which assess whether Oxfam's interventions have contributed to positive change in different thematic outcome areas. As we mentioned earlier, Oxfam is an organisation that strives to put women's rights at the heart of everything we do, and one of the key thematic areas Oxfam's senior leadership chose to review was the impact of its interventions on women's empowerment. A 'global outcome indicator' was proposed, namely 'the percentage of supported

women demonstrating significantly greater involvement in household decision-making and influencing affairs at the community level', to which each impact evaluation in this theme would report.

This global outcome indicator therefore provided the initial focus for the measurement approach, but – as we go on here to discuss – the approach has since expanded to include further dimensions of empowerment. The nature of this indicator is important, as it determined the nature of project interventions which would be evaluated; how 'empowerment' was defined and assessed in these evaluations; and, to a large degree, the evaluation method applied.

The impact evaluations involve the application of quasi-experimental methods to evaluate a random sample of interventions primarily implemented at a household or community level. These methods involve the use of household-level surveys with people participating in an Oxfam-supported project, as well as with a comparable population in areas where the project is not active. Through the use of statistical analysis methods (multi-variable regression and propensity-score matching),<sup>6</sup> evaluators are able to compare these two groups, and discern where there is evidence of project impact on key empowerment or livelihood outcomes. Evaluations are designed by a team of three specialists and implemented with and through country programme teams and partners with the assistance of local consultants and survey staff.

The approach was designed to meet demands – from both internal and external stakeholders – for impact evaluations that were substantially more focused and rigorous than Oxfam's average, of projects that usually had no formal baseline and often limited monitoring data. Budget was also a factor in determining approach: with a budget of approximately £20,000 (including staff time) per effectiveness review and a total of 12 'large *n*' studies conducted by this team of three each year, the size of the surveyed population is limited. The evaluations were conducted at the end of the project, and as such, experimental evaluation approaches which rely on randomising participants into an intervention at the start of the project, for example, randomised control trials, were not an option.

### *Year one (2011/12)*

The first set of Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews focused on aspects considered by Oxfam's evaluation team and thematic specialist staff to be most important and relevant to the projects selected for review. A questionnaire was administered by survey staff to women in households reached by the project activities. It was also administered to others in comparison communities, which had not participated in the projects. It asked respondents about two sets of issues: first, their involvement in several aspects of household decision-making, such as decisions regarding the purchase of new assets, or choices related to children's education or family planning, and second, their participation in community-level leadership and

decision-making. Beyond these two main areas of decision-making, further questions covered issues pertaining to self-confidence, and women's ownership of assets – including both those used in production, and also other high-value assets like jewellery or a television, which can potentially be sold to raise capital.

This questionnaire was implemented across the first set of three Women's Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews in 2011/12. While the dimensions of empowerment covered by these first-generation reviews were quite limited, and the questionnaire implemented quite inflexibly across the different country contexts, some interesting top-level findings emerged. For example, in each of the three projects under review, there was evidence that some women participants in the project were more likely to have the opportunity and feel able to influence affairs in their community. In contrast, none of the reviews found clear evidence of women's increased involvement in key aspects of household decision-making.

These may not be particularly surprising results, given that several of the projects under review were actively establishing women's farmer groups or co-operatives, or providing community-level training on women's rights, which may have directly impacted on the respondent's opportunity to contribute to community-level decision-making even in the short or medium term. Also, patterns of household-level decision-making are arguably more connected to cultural norms and are perhaps more likely to take longer to change. However, it is important to note that having such findings – especially derived from a more rigorous evaluative approach – provided opportunity to have productive discussions on the issues raised by the reviews, and helped get traction from project teams, policy advisers, and senior management to explore the concept of empowerment in greater depth and detail.

#### *Years two and three (2012/13 and 2013/14)*

As Oxfam embarked on the second year of reviews in 2012/13, the team was keen to learn both from the experience of the first year of implementation, as well as from the experience of other organisations who were similarly trying to tackle the definition and measurement of women's empowerment. In trying to come up with a framework for measuring another 'hard-to-measure' concept – resilience – Oxfam had the opportunity to learn from the experience of the [Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative \(OPHI\)](#) and its work to develop a multi-dimensional approach to measuring poverty.

Alongside its multi-dimensional poverty analysis work, OPHI has also joined with the International Food Policy and Research Institute (IFPRI) to develop a multi-dimensional tool to measure women's empowerment in agriculture. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index, which resulted, is a composite measure which is comprised of several 'domains' considered important to the empowerment of women farmers, including involvement in decisions about agricultural production, decision-making power over productive resources, control over use of income, leadership in the



community, and time use (Alkire *et al.* 2012). One or more indicators is connected to each of these domains, and information on each is captured through household surveys.

Building on this approach, the effectiveness review team defined four domains, together with ten constituent characteristics assessed to be most appropriate to the broader approaches and context in which Oxfam works. Table 1 illustrates these.

The questionnaire used in year one was modified in order to capture information on each of the ten characteristics, and in the analysis stage we employed the OPHI approach to aggregate this information into one overall 'empowerment score' for each female respondent.<sup>7</sup> As in 2011/12, surveys were carried out with both project participants and with appropriate comparison respondents.

Using this new method, evaluators are able to determine whether there was evidence that the project had affected overall empowerment – as measured by this framework – as well as what changes had occurred in relation to the various domains and characteristics included in the framework.

For example, in looking at the underlying detail from one of the reviews in Nigeria, interesting findings emerged – there was evidence of positive changes among supported women in community influencing, participation in community groups, and attitudes towards the rights of women in wider society. Where no evidence of change was detected, it tended to be in those indicators linked to issues at a more personal or household level, such as women's involvement in household decision-making and attitudes towards gender roles in the household.

Table 1: Dimensions of empowerment – year two

Dimension	Characteristics
Household decision-making	Input in productive decisions
	Input to other household decisions
Control over resources	Access to credit
	Ownership of strategic assets
Public engagement	Community influencing
	Group involvement
Self-perception	Self-efficacy
	Attitude to sharing household duties
	Attitude to women's rights
	Attitude to position of women



It was interesting that these findings in many ways mirrored those from the first year of reviews, but the finer grain of the analysis permitted a more detailed picture of the state of empowerment. Sometimes, this revealed seemingly confusing or contradictory findings – for example, we found high levels of self-confidence among supported women, but very ‘traditional’ views on the role of women and men in the household, together with seemingly limited opportunities to participate in decision-making. This prompted a more detailed and enlightening discussion with the project team, aiming to understand more accurately the ‘context of empowerment’ in which the project was operating.

It also, in turn, prompted further deliberation on how to refine evaluation tools in order to make them more context-appropriate and sensitive to a wider range of aspects pertaining to empowerment. As a result of this, the framework employed in the latter part of 2012/13 and in the current round of reviews (2013/14) has been expanded and amended to cover five dimensions, and a greater number of constituent characteristics. The current framework offers a ‘suite’ of characteristics from which the evaluator and project team can then select those most appropriate to the project’s theory of change and the particular context in question. So far, in practice, this has usually involved a review of the characteristics with the project team, and then some modest changes to the questionnaire depending on the context or specific focus of the project. These discussions have also sometimes revealed new characteristics which were previously omitted, and these can then be added to the ‘menu’ for future evaluations. It is hoped that by strengthening and embedding this approach in this iterative way the evaluation will be more appropriately tailored to the project’s theory of change, and therefore both more valid and more useful for project, project team, and organisational learning (Table 2).

## Critique

After three years of piloting and of regular and incremental improvements to the Effectiveness Reviews, it is both necessary and appropriate to step back and ask some bigger questions about the measurement approach that Oxfam GB has developed for the Women’s Empowerment Effectiveness Reviews. Rather than provide a more detailed commentary on the more technical elements of the measurement approach, or broader challenges associated with the design and implementation of the organisational performance framework, we will focus in this section on areas we see as most related to monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) in the area of women’s empowerment programming. Here, we draw out what we see as key areas for nuanced reflection and improvement, and set out a few challenges and areas for improvement in Oxfam’s practice in coming years. We hope, of course, that these insights into Oxfam practice have interest and relevance for colleagues in other organisations developing their own methods for evaluating women’s empowerment.

Table 2: Suite of economic empowerment characteristics – years two and three

Dimension	Characteristics
Ability to make decisions and influence	Involvement in household investment decisions
	Involvement in livelihood management decisions
	Involvement in income-spending decisions
	Involvement in general decisions
	Degree of influence in community decision-making
Self-perception	Opinions on women's property rights
	Opinions on women's political rights
	Opinions on women's educational equality
	Opinions on women's economic and political roles
	Opinions on early marriage
	Self-confidence
	Psycho-social well-being
Personal freedom	Literacy
	Autonomy in work
	Time to pursue personal goals
	Support from family in pursuing personal goals
	Attitude to violence against women
	Experience of violence
Access to and control over resources	Ownership of land and property
	Ownership of other productive assets
	Independent income
	Extent of role in managing/keeping family's cash
	Savings
	Access to credit
Support from social networks	Degree of social connectivity
	Participation in community groups
	Level of support provided by groups to pursue own initiatives

### *Whose empowerment?*

As noted earlier, Oxfam GB's approach to organisational impact assessment was developed by a central evaluation team, at the request of senior leadership. The dimensions of empowerment outlined in the tool are the product of reviews of existing research, combined with inputs from Oxfam GB's gender advisers. During evaluation and survey design, data collection and analysis, evaluators must make a series of judgements that impact on how empowerment is defined and reported. For example, the construction of composite indices requires various value judgements at multiple stages of the aggregation process, including when assigning weights to the different dimensions under consideration, making composite indices necessarily subject to debate. While evaluators draw on experience and regularly seek out objective measures or advice from others, individual judgement is often required. In addition, the global effectiveness review team was initially comprised of men (though since 2013, both men and women) from fairly homogeneous backgrounds – they are all English-speaking, living in Oxford, from OECD countries, and university educated. This will inevitably lead to limitations and challenges in defining empowerment for people whose identities and realities are very different.

That said, pursuing this evaluation approach has provided the opportunity to have much more meaningful discussion with project teams, thematic leads, and senior management about what they actually mean by empowerment. This in itself represents organisational capacity building in the wider process of mainstreaming gender issues into Oxfam. In particular, project delivery teams have found that having a tangible evaluation framework as a starting point has allowed us to move beyond abstract concepts, and to pin down ideas into terms that make sense to project staff. During the evaluation design stage, the evaluator discusses with the project team how the project has been trying to affect changes in empowerment through the various project interventions. This exercise alone has generated valuable discussions and learning moments regarding assumptions around the rationale for the selected project interventions, and the 'theory of change', as well as the barriers and opportunities to empowerment in the particular context in which the project operates.

Referring again to the example from Nigeria, women supported by the project scored highly on the self-efficacy scale, which we, as outsiders, would normally assume to be an indicator of greater empowerment. At the same time these same women held what we might see as very 'traditional' views of the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the household – something which the Oxfam team determined (pre-analysis) were a marker of disempowerment.

While these two measures of empowerment are not necessarily mutually exclusive, reviewing the data and reflecting on our categorisation of 'traditional attitudes' generated debates within the evaluation team about what empowerment means to them.<sup>8</sup> It also prompted greater caution in determining how we score these different

measures, and the danger of drawing too heavily on stereotyped or externally determined visions of empowerment. It also has to be acknowledged that by aggregating rich data into one composite index, one risks losing crucial information that might otherwise be useful to programme teams. In order to respond to this, we decided, in the most recent reviews, to give greater focus to the results on the individual indicators, enabling people with much greater understanding of women's empowerment in that context to explore the findings further.

### *Ensuring appropriate measurement*

Beyond conceptual challenges, evaluation practitioners have a secondary task to contend with: finding appropriate tools to measure empowerment across the diversity of interventions that development organisations implement, while being sensitive to the diversity of context both across and within different countries and of identities and personalities among different women.

The evaluation team in Oxfam GB has attempted to address this issue by offering a suite (or 'menu') of indicators from which the project team and evaluator can select and use, depending on the aspects of empowerment that are seen to be most important and appropriate to the context and the changes the project is trying to effect.

Ensuring evaluation is guided by local definitions and understanding of empowerment is an improvement, but it is not enough. Decisions on what empowerment looks like for particular women in particular communities are still largely taken by people *working on* – and not necessarily participating in or being affected by – a project. We recognise that people affected by a project must be involved in determining its success (this is a given in Oxfam's approach to MEL, but is particularly critical in an empowerment project) – and the failure to do this meaningfully so far is one of the biggest shortfalls of the implementation of this approach to date.

We are, therefore, expecting to trial approaches that incorporate participatory methods at the beginning and end of the evaluation process – whereby, at a minimum, the decisions on which indicators are relevant for 'empowerment' among women living in a particular context are made (or at least informed) by those women themselves. *How* we do this is still to be determined, but different approaches could include better linking with a project's existing monitoring and accountability practices, incorporation of more 'immersive' research, or use of participatory processes at the evaluation design and the results interpretation stages. Regardless, simply bringing project participants into the discussion on what empowerment means or 'looks like' to them, in that particular context, is a critical next step. In the Nigerian example, doing so would have helped us make sounder judgements on what constitutes 'more' or 'less' empowered, as well as to interpret confusing or seemingly paradoxical results. We also anticipate involving local women will both help reveal new aspects of empowerment which

otherwise may have been overlooked, and in itself be part of the empowerment process.

### *Valuing the right things*

As a complex, somewhat intangible and multi-dimensional construct, women's empowerment involves many small and inter-dependent changes. However, it may be unrealistic to expect to detect changes in many of the indicators that are being measured over what is typically a short-term project lifespan (e.g. two to five years). Some empowerment indicators currently included in the framework, which probably feature in many log-frames connected to empowerment interventions, may be too 'ambitious' and the measurement tools used to assess them insufficiently sensitive to detect small changes or to take into account human complexity and power relationships. In the context of low-budget evaluations, this concern is aggravated by the fact that one needs a sufficiently large data set for small changes to be picked up as being statistically significant. If evaluation and measurement approaches are better able to discern and highlight smaller 'baby-steps' being achieved along the path to these longer-term outcomes, it would strengthen our analysis and understanding of contributing factors to empowerment. We are inspired by one example of hard-to-detect but meaningful steps, which many analytical approaches would bypass in search of 'higher returns'. One woman in a three-year empowerment project, quoted in Batliwala and Pittman (2010, 19) states:

*Three years ago, when the landlord in whose fields I work addressed me, I would answer him looking down at his feet. Now, I answer with my eyes on his chest. Next year, I will be strong enough to look him right in the eyes when I speak to him.*

Taking the time to identify and then capture such nuances is essential, but the implications for cost and staff time may make this prohibitive to implement across all of our reviews. At a minimum, Oxfam staff and partners are challenged to trial different approaches to meaningful participation in a number of reviews, even as we make more modest improvements across the board.

Another challenge for this evaluation approach is to identify and assess 'unintended' or unexpected effects of programme activities. This is a standard limitation of fixed evaluation structures (that is, methods which are developed to evaluate success or otherwise in achieving pre-determined project outcomes) which has come into focus as the evaluation team looks at the evaluation's ability to understand how women's economic empowerment projects have affected care work.

Research has illuminated the ongoing imbalance in care work provided by women and Oxfam's own research has lately focused on how development interventions can worsen women's unequal load (Kidder 2013). This is one aspect that is clearly

important to try to assess, but which is often neglected in evaluations of livelihoods and economic empowerment interventions. Projects often seek to increase women's empowerment in large part by providing economic opportunities specifically for women. In many of the contexts in which Oxfam implements these interventions, women are the main care providers – whether to children, elderly family members, or the household generally – and it is important to also consider the project's impact on women's time and energy and whether there has been any change in the division of labour in the household as a result. While changes in income and decision-making are being measured, the effect that interventions have in *adding to* women's existing roles and responsibilities is not sufficiently understood or measured. Economic interventions of the type described – whether aimed at a collective or more individual income-generating activity – have related and generally quite intensive demands on the participant's time and energy. It is fair to say that our evaluative work to date has not adequately assessed the knock-on effects of these demands on supported women's time or responsibilities.

#### *Evaluation as a tool for empowerment and accountability*

Demand for these evaluations was driven primarily by needs for organisational performance information, delivered through the application of rigorous and defensible evaluation methods. It is argued that such information would also lead to improvements in programme quality, at the project and perhaps at the organisational level. These evaluations have earned the recognition of external oversight bodies, such as the Department for International Development and 3ie, and from 2012/13 there has been an increasing focus on working with teams to build understanding and ownership of the questions the review are trying to answer and a commitment to undertake more follow-up research, to ensure that the findings are acted upon and influence practice. This is particularly impressive, considering budgetary constraints.

While credible performance information is now available to managers and funders (so-called 'upwards accountability'), the evaluation method has arguably involved trade-offs on accountability to partner organisations, as well as 'downwards', to communities and poor people. One could argue that ultimately Oxfam's primary stakeholders will benefit if the reviews are credible, and lead to Oxfam doing more of the things that are working and less of the things that are not, but the counter-argument is that the statistical methods employed by the evaluations are sometimes highly technical, and the purpose and results of the review are often not disseminated clearly to the communities involved. As an organisation committed to partnership, results, and 'downwards accountability', these reviews could provide Oxfam the opportunity through appropriate communication of results, and approaches such as empowerment evaluation, the means to both assess and promote women's empowerment.

The act of balancing accountability and learning demands is not new, and yet one in which there is continuing difficulty – getting the balance right is neither simple nor easy. Done poorly, evaluation approaches such as the one described in this paper can be tremendously *disempowering* to field staff and, potentially, to beneficiary groups who become subjects in our scientific inquiry. It is clear that evaluators have an obligation to ‘do no harm’ through the application of their methods, and we would include in this a responsibility to guard against ‘disempowering’ ways of working.

The effectiveness review team have tried to do so in a number of ways, primarily through how technical specialists interact and work with partner and field staff. Detailed discussions explain the intent and method behind the evaluation; the survey is designed in conjunction with the local team; plainly written summaries explain technical results, and collaborative debriefing sessions help evaluators and field teams understand what the data are telling us about effectiveness. Oxfam also encourages the local team to share the results of the review with the project participants. In one case in Honduras, the results were also shared by the partner organisation with both intervention and comparison communities, which actively wanted to learn from the experiences of how the project had worked in their neighbouring communities. Country project teams have final comment on the evaluation report, through management responses which are published simultaneously with evaluation reports, on public websites.

One important note is that this approach was designed with the assumption that it would complement existing participatory programme monitoring and management processes. In reality, scarce resources, tight project timelines or under-involvement in monitoring and evaluation at the project design or review stages mean that detailed discussions about issues such as the ‘dimensions of empowerment’ may be missed. This approach could be strengthened to make the process more empowering for the people we work with, by incorporating the tool into a much earlier stage of the project cycle.

As with resilience, the process of developing, testing, and refining the measurement approach for empowerment is supporting Oxfam to be clearer about what empowerment means in a particular context, and arguably this could helpfully be used throughout the programme learning cycle – as a lens for analysis and scoping, to inform programme strategy/design, and develop appropriate monitoring and evaluation strategies. As mentioned above, one of the key benefits to date has been the starting point that the approach has provided in ‘pinning down’ what empowerment actually looks like or means for the team working on the project. If the discussions could be widened – as previously suggested – to women and men actually living in the project communities, and carried out through the whole life-cycle of the project, our feeling is that this would yield a much more informative and empowering process all round.



## Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to present and reflect critically on an evolving approach to assessing women's empowerment interventions. After three years of implementation, Oxfam's self-described 'experiment' in measuring organisational effectiveness has yielded not only huge amounts of survey data but also considerable lessons about both measurement approaches and our understanding of 'empowerment'. The challenge, of course, lies in translating those lessons into improved practice, so that evaluation exercises directly benefit those Oxfam works with in future.

This article has also examined a number of limitations and potential shortfalls in the current approach, asking questions about the definition of empowerment used and who should be involved in making decisions at different stages of the evaluation. We note some of the practical challenges encountered by the effectiveness review team over the last three years, as well as highlighting areas where the approach has evolved over time. It is our hope that such critical reflection will enable others to better understand and build on Oxfam's recent experience. Just as important, this has been an opportunity to document and share some of the tensions and trade-offs involved in the current approach. It will be a considerable (but potentially inspiring) challenge to Oxfam to further improve its current technically rigorous, pragmatically delivered approach in evaluations to come.

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## Notes

- 1 As an organisation, Oxfam is committed to 'putting women's rights at the heart of all we do'. This is articulated as part of the organisation's 2013–2019 Strategic Plan, and has been a consistent instruction to staff at Oxfam GB for some time.

- 2 Oxfam is an international confederation of 17 organisations working together in more than 90 countries. Oxfam Great Britain (GB) is a member of Oxfam International. The Global Performance Framework and Project Effectiveness Reviews are initiatives of Oxfam GB, managed by Oxfam GB staff. This article usually uses the simpler term Oxfam, except when specificity is needed to help illustrate formal management and accountability lines.
- 3 It is important to note that the demand was for data that could be aggregated – but not compared. The evaluation framework does not allow for performance comparisons between very different projects and contexts.
- 4 From a quote attributed to Sheela Patel, Director of SPARC, India, in Batliwala and Pittman (2010, 7).
- 5 The authors wish to acknowledge the work of Claire Hutchings, Rob Fuller, Karl Hughes, and Bet Caeyers (effectiveness review team members) along with countless others who have contributed to improving this tool over time.
- 6 Each evaluation report includes detailed technical explanations of how this analysis is conducted. For example, we recommend reading pages 5–8 of the 2012 Nigerian project evaluation report (Oxfam GB 2012). For those new to these concepts, we recommend the ‘Better Evaluation’ website ([www.betterevaluation.org](http://www.betterevaluation.org)) as a useful place to find accessible and clear background on evaluation methods.
- 7 We acknowledge that the idea of aggregating binary indicators to create an overall index of empowerment is not unique to OPHI. However, OPHI’s approach and thought leadership has had a large influence on Oxfam’s approach to impact evaluation of ‘large *n*’ programmes.
- 8 There may also be some form of measurement error at play. Measures of some characteristics include self-reports on attitudes (e.g. ‘how much do you agree or disagree with this statement?’), and project participants may simply answer in ways that they think will please Oxfam. One might also suggest that women’s attitudes about gender roles result from internalising social norms about women’s subordinate role. Among this group of respondents, scores for ‘self-efficacy’, constructed from ten separate questions, were remarkably high. In this particular project at least, respondents appeared to be very strong and self-confident women with traditional beliefs about gender roles.

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