The need for reliable systems: gendered work in Oxfam's Uganda programme

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Introduction

Despite the familiarity of gender as a development issue, it is still not always apparent that bringing a gender perspective into development interventions means fostering fundamental social change.

This paper looks at the findings of a Gender Review of Oxfam GB's programme in Uganda.[1] The Review found that the work directed towards integrating gender relied on a conventional approach which could not effectively bring about change. This, and other limitations of the programme, were the result of a lack of appropriate and reliable systems.

Oxfam GB's effort to place gender concerns at the core of its management practices is widely recognised. This has been attempted through the creation of a specialised team of advisers, the formulation of a Gender Policy, and the development of implementation strategies. The Gender Policy recognises the links between poverty and gender relations. Country offices are given the freedom to interpret and adapt this to their own contexts. However, results remain chequered across the organisation and among its local counterparts, with different impacts being achieved in different regions, countries, and sectors. This is, to a great extent, because the Policy is not supported by a more systematic and binding approach to planning, monitoring, and evaluating gender-sensitive work.

Background

The Review was initiated by the Uganda Office to aid the implementation of institutional changes, namely the recent emphasis on

advocacy work (in particular on land and debt issues) and, at the international level, the shift towards more decentralised regional programmes. The aim was not to evaluate the impact of the programme work on gender relations, but to learn what approaches had been adopted in theory and in practice, and how these could be improved.

The Review was carried out in two main stages: a desk review in the UK, followed by field work. In Uganda, the team consisted of two people from the Country Office and two from Oxfam headquarters. The process included discussions and workshops with staff, local counterparts, and representatives of other organisations. A visit was also made to the refugee settlement of Imvepi where Oxfam has carried out operational work.

The Uganda programme covers several activities. A range of local NGOs are funded, in the areas of community-based health care, disability, and food security. Oxfam has also initiated operational programmes with agro-pastoralists in Karamoja, and a long-term development programme in Kitgum district, although activities in both areas are constrained by ongoing security problems. The Office has also been running a large settlement programme for Sudanese refugees in Arua District (north Uganda) since 1994.

Advocacy work has expanded greatly over the past four years, with significant demands on staff time. There have been important achievements, most notably on the issue of debt relief and structural adjustment policies. Oxfam has also worked on land issues, where it has supported the Uganda Land Alliance, which lobbies for legal reforms.

Initially, the Uganda programme followed a conventional approach to gender concerns, 'targeting' women, in particular the satisfaction of their immediate daily needs. A change in emphasis came after 1992. This meant moving away from small women-only projects, and in theory towards appropriate strategies that would be the outcome of an in-depth social, and thus gendered, analysis. In 1994, the decision was taken to eliminate the post of the Gender and Development Programme Officer (GADPO), which had been in place since October 1988, because it was felt that the position risked exonerating other staff members from taking responsibility to address gender concerns. In reality, this decision also resulted in the loss of opportunities for proactive interventions, and also of safeguards against gender-blind or insensitive work.

Managing change

The Review found a number of interrelated problems: poor understanding of key concepts; unwillingness to challenge what were

defined as traditional roles and attitudes; the deployment of *ad hoc* initiatives; and the failure to interact with a broader constituency. At the root of these was the absence of procedures through which understanding, performance, and outcomes could be planned systematically, and evaluated.

For instance, while staff were familiar with notions of gender as social relations, and had a good grasp of 'gender language', this understanding remained at an extremely broad and abstract level. In some cases, Oxfam's local counterpart organisations still understood gender in an extremely out-dated sense, and referred to separate 'gender programmes', which were seen as 'the soft parts' (in the words of the representative of one of these) of otherwise more serious activities.

Poor understanding, accompanied by lack of confidence, led staff and partners to take a defensive stance, based on an expressed concern that 'culture' would cause negative reactions from communities (especially men) to any explicit attempts at confronting gender inequalities. For example, Oxfam's approach to the land reform issue ignored the different implications for women and men, in the belief that explicit advocacy on women's access to land, for example, would alienate male supporters and hence be divisive. This preoccupation with an unspecified notion of culture was never addressed or properly managed, and as a result, it has led to pursuing activities that are intended not to challenge dominant gender norms and practices. For example, the continued support to many local groups and organisations for loans and credit activities to women, despite their widespread and long-term bad performance, or to activities which assume that gender concerns are being addressed simply on the basis of having a numerical equality in the representation of women in committees and groups.

While a preoccupation with safeguarding the cultural integrity of local communities is commendable and sometimes strategically advisable, it should not become a constant excuse for tame approaches that relegate women to stereotypical roles, or that promote gender awareness simply as a means to sustainable development. These may even be counter-productive in creating the false impression that 'gender issues have been addressed'.

In addition, Oxfam has failed to interact with the broader environment of organisations (both national and region-wide) that are engaged in gender-related activities. In other words, it failed to explore the opportunities for mutual support, information exchange, and lobbying, offered by the growing women's movement in the country. Very often, this has been the

outcome of management decisions not to engage with particular organisations on the basis of a fairly vague and limited idea of what they stood for or could offer. For example, Oxfam Uganda kept at arm's length the government's Ministry of Gender and Community Development, because it perceived it as 'focusing on training and workshops and limited practical work'. In fact, like many similar organisations, the Ministry is a complex and multi-layered body, which includes many capable and creative people with whom fruitful exchanges are possible.

Integrating a gender perspective in the programme relied on *ad hoc* approaches, often based on a single initiative or activity. Furthermore, gender-based initiatives had been left to chance, and were overly dependent on individual personalities. For example, a major shift in the management of the refugee camp in Arua, which significantly improved the representation of refugee women, was the unplanned outcome of a short-term secondment.

Gender considerations were, instead, constantly treated as 'add-ons' to the main part of programmes or projects, both by staff and local counterparts. How this contributes to minimising the value of gender issues is acutely illustrated by the claim of one senior manager that insecurity and time pressures had prevented the programme from looking 'at the finer details, such as incorporating gender'.

At the core of all these problems, lies the absence of reliable systems and binding procedures to support and monitor how work of this type is identified, planned and executed, what technical and other support is needed to ensure it effectiveness, and whether any impact can be established.

This was most evident among Oxfam's local counterparts, with whom relations had never entailed stringent reporting requirements that featured gender as a criterion. There had been no demands for accountability on the basis of established and agreed systems, even though some of the Ugandan counterparts felt that, on gender in particular, this would have been a helpful way of monitoring their own progress and of receiving support.

This was mirrored more generally by a lack of support, either to local organisations, or to Oxfam staff in operational programmes, for developing social analysis and in building practices emanating from it, in accessing information, and in communicating appropriate messages to communities. A key mechanism that could have been in place would have been the presence of an individual or working unit with responsibilities for gender issues.

It is not only the effectiveness and reliability of the systems in place that determine how change is managed, but also the sensitivity with which mechanisms are employed. The Review found that in many instances senior managers had demonstrated scant regard for the different needs of male and female staff, especially those working in the difficult circumstances of operational programmes. For example, while the harsh and insecure living conditions were inevitably not conducive to bringing in families, there was little attention given to compensating staff for this. This also acted as a disincentive — discouraging female staff from applying for or remaining in such positions. The Review also found that Oxfam had made little effort to monitor the stress and strains that are inevitable in situations of insecurity.

Conclusions

The obvious solution suggested by the Review was to develop a clear and binding strategy. This would contain a statement of the broad goal of the type of social change that the Uganda programme is trying to achieve, integrating gender concerns. It would also contain a detailed outline of mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, for external support to local counterparts, for capacity-building among staff, and for interaction with women's organisations and other relevant bodies. Putting such mechanisms in place would entail the necessary leadership from senior management at all levels, as well as financial commitments. It should also entail the appointment of a person or advisory group leading on gender, to ensure a systematic and reliable approach.

At another level, the Review pointed to the need to take a more political approach to gender concerns. Oxfam GB's known stance on rights would offer it the ideal point of entry to participate in public debates, with a clear and progressive voice on gender issues, supportive of organisations and individuals more hampered by political and other constraints. Networking, and a stronger gender emphasis in its advocacy work, would be practical ways in which this could be realised. This kind of innovative approach can only be adopted if the organisation is prepared to recognise and grasp opportunities as they present themselves, and to confront possible risks.

Notes

1   There are several affiliates to Oxfam International. Oxfam GB, previously known as Oxfam (UK and Ireland), is the British member.