



Joint visit of Oxfam and partners in the REE-CALL working area on September 8, 2014 (Photo credit: SKS REE-CALL project)

FIVE CRITICAL FACTORS FOR WORKING WELL IN PARTNERSHIPS

My experience in Bangladesh – by Ashish Kumar Bakshi

What are the critical factors in managing a good partnership? My experience coordinating the REE-CALL (Resilience through Economic Empowerment, Climate Change Adaptation, Leadership and Learning) programme in Bangladesh over the past five years has taught me that no matter how big the programme, or how complex, success depends on five critical factors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashish joined Oxfam in 2010, and has 19 years of experience in the development sector. In his current role as Rural Manager, one of his main responsibilities is to provide overall guidance to the team in regards to partnerships, including project planning and budgeting, capacity building of Oxfam colleagues and partners, ensuring programme quality through participatory monitoring, and facilitating learning and collaboration between Oxfam and partners.

PARTNERING FOR IMPACT SERIES

To do the work it does, Oxfam works closely with partners at all stages of the programme, in all kind of contexts: humanitarian, influencing, development, etc. But what does it mean for our staff? Each day brings new challenges and opportunities, so how do they do it? Following a reflective and productive writeshop,¹ this Partnering for Impact series was developed to share and explore learning from experienced practitioners about what it takes to 'work well in partnership'.

1 INTRODUCTION

What are the critical factors in managing a good partnership? My experience coordinating the REE-CALL (Resilience through Economic Empowerment, Climate Change Adaptation, Leadership and Learning) programme in Bangladesh over the past five years has taught me that no matter how big the programme, or how complex, success depends on five critical factors:

- Trust, respect and mutual learning;
- Shared values and commitment;
- Joint participation, responsibilities and ownership;
- Joint accountability;
- Risk sharing.

The REE-CALL programme is ambitious, aiming to ensure that women and men most at risk from disasters and climate change in Bangladesh are able to thrive, in spite of shocks and change. The aim of the project is to achieve resilience through an inclusive community-based approach. So far, Oxfam and 15 partner NGOs have reached 225,000 households in 14 of the most disaster-prone districts in Bangladesh, and organized around 800 community-based organizations (CBOs), amplifying their voice, securing rights and entitlements, and increasing their income through diversified livelihood options.

2 CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

To work well in a partnership, it is crucial from the outset for Oxfam to establish a functional working relationship with its partners. This can start through an assessment process and measuring the strategic fit between Oxfam and the partners. Equity, transparency, mutual benefit and ownership are critical success factors, and are based upon common goals, shared responsibility and mutual trust, respect and values. Achieving the desired results of the project depends on the proactive roles of partners and their dedication to the vulnerable women and men being targeted.

Oxfam's approach should be very open in terms of sharing challenges, giving and receiving feedback, regular interaction and regular coordination meetings. Flexibility in decision making is also key. These guiding principles and processes help to develop and maintain successful partnerships.

TRUST, RESPECT AND MUTUAL LEARNING

Power imbalances, knowledge gaps, and absence of trust and respect can damage relationships with partners. Oxfam believes that development is an ongoing process that cannot be designed or controlled by international agencies. It recognizes that local partners have empirical knowledge and a greater understanding of the local context. Upholding this belief, Oxfam encourages a reciprocal learning process between itself and its partners through meetings, workshops, field visits, case story documentation and in many other ways. This learning process helps to expedite the knowledge and skills of Oxfam and partners for more effective implementation of the project interventions.

SHARED VALUES AND COMMITMENT

Oxfam and partners uphold the values of empowering people living in poverty, women and those who are marginalized. They also promote inclusiveness, and accountability to rights holders. Oxfam's partnerships ought to be initiated on the basis of similarity in organizational vision. This contributes to more effective and stronger associations. Moreover, the commitment of Oxfam and its partners to the same goal ensures the partnership is strong and stable, and results in positive changes in the lives of poor and vulnerable people.

JOINT PARTICIPATION, RESPONSIBILITIES AND OWNERSHIP

Oxfam and partners should share responsibility at all stages of project planning and management, and in quality control, cost management, risk management and dealing with stakeholders. The participation of partner NGOs is not always possible at the design stage of a project. In Bangladesh, for instance, we decided to incorporate potential partners in consultation meetings in the context analysis and proposal development phases. This improved the level and quality of participation from the partners, and thus of the programme. Joint participation and responsibility does not always mean that every stakeholder does everything. Each member of the partnership has particular strengths: for example, within the REE-CALL programme partners took a more significant role in local-level advocacy, influencing service providers and mobilizing local resources.

JOINT ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability to the rights-holders, government and donors, along with bilateral accountability between Oxfam and partners, is also very important for appropriate programming. The joint accountability practices of Oxfam and partners to beneficiaries and other stakeholders can be underpinned in many ways, for instance by ensuring the participation of project beneficiaries in the planning and implementation process, initiating the complaint mechanism by appropriate methods, and the engagement of local authority and local government representatives in the monitoring of project activities.

RISK SHARING

Project risks should be distributed among Oxfam and partners on the basis of their strengths and capabilities. For example, in the REE-CALL programme, the partners managed field activities despite a five-month period of political unrest throughout the country. This was possible because of their strong links with the local community and knowledge of the context. Meanwhile, Oxfam managed the financial risks by raising funds in the middle of the financial year to minimize funding gaps in the project.

3 TYPICAL CHALLENGES IN THE PARTNERSHIP JOURNEY

Many challenges lie ahead when we start a programme. Some can threaten programme quality and timely implementation, and working with partners can add to this risk. Typical challenges are:

- Lack of ownership and low engagement of key staff members;
- Reluctance to maintain the standard policy;
- Inefficiency and/or complexity of procurement, recruitment and financial management.

These risks underline the importance of **capacity building** in delivering a programme. Sustainable support between partners can significantly strengthen the governance system and lead to better results in the project interventions. For example, Oxfam in Bangladesh has developed management capacity in procurement, recruitment, financial management and many other areas. These areas for capacity building and programme content were decided through a joint assessment exercise. Materials, methods and mode of delivery were agreed through joint efforts and mutual understanding. Training participants were

selected on the basis of agreed criteria. Senior staff at Oxfam and partners demonstrated skills in facilitation and accompanied frontline staff in applying new skills in the field.

Two-way learning and feedback also can help reduce status problems for both parties. In our experience, partnership is a two-way process where values and attitudes influence the relationship. The Oxfam team always tries to take the role of facilitator and supporter with partner organizations. Developing a feedback mechanism can also help bilateral accountability and strengthen reciprocal learning in the partnership.

3 CONCLUSION

The scale of poverty and suffering of vulnerable people across the world should not be underestimated, and has many underlying factors. Single and isolated attempts can create cosmetic changes in the lives of vulnerable people, but the benefit is rarely sustainable in the long term. Local organizations are usually robust with a good understanding of local context. Consequently, any partnership between Oxfam and local organizations can add value in the journey from poverty to power, and in building resilient communities through comprehensive interventions.

NOTES

¹ A 'writeshop' is an intensive, participatory process that brings together experts and process facilitators under one roof to produce simple, user-friendly materials in a short period of time.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

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