THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN BUILDING EFFECTIVE URBAN RESILIENCE

Learning Paper

OXFAM

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List of acronyms

NGO: non-governmental organization

CSO: civil society organization

MEAL: monitoring, evaluation accountability and learning

UN: United Nations

INGO: international non-governmental organization

DP: Disaster Preparedness

DRR: Disaster Risk Reduction

Executive summary

The purpose of this learning paper is to **reflect on how Oxfam, as an international NGO, can effectively shape and be part of a partnership in implementing joint integrated initiatives for effective urban resilience**. The paper reviews current practices and challenges, drawing on the views of many different stakeholders within and outside Oxfam. Lessons are drawn mainly from the SEA "Building Urban Climate Resilience in Southeastern Africa", implemented by Oxfam in close collaboration with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), DIMSUR, the governments and selected municipalities of Malawi, Mozambique, Madagascar and the Union of the Comoros. The methodology included a review of key documents, interviews, and discussions with a range of Oxfam colleagues, partner representatives and experts from donor community and other organisations. The paper consists of three parts: Part I, Literature Review, Part II, Framing multi-stakeholder partnerships, Part III, Conclusions and Way Forward.

Part I, Literature Review: Relevant readings were analyzed to highlight the importance of placing multi-stakeholder partnerships within a conceptual, analytical and strategic framework, with an emphasis on Oxfam's role and experiences.

Part II, Framing multi-stakeholder partnerships: With a focus on the multi-stakeholder context and an examination of the key themes, the paper evaluates partnerships, shares the comments from the interviewees, and identifies and discusses issues and lessons learned related to five key elements of effective

practice. First, the paper analyzes partnership in a multi-stakeholder context by **exploring the challenges of managing and leading multi-stakeholder partnerships**, including the preferred approach to partnerships and requirements, Oxfam's perceived added value and role as a partner, the approaches promoted and working with governments at different levels. Key principles and good practices for effective partnerships are discussed.

The concept of partnership is then considered **with reference to power relations.** The discussion of power dynamics and how they relate to accountability and responsibility has led to the concern that partnerships often lack institutional methods for dealing with power. Questions are raised regarding the concentration of power in the hands of influential partners and what role Oxfam can play in fostering and promoting ownership, shared thinking, risk sharing, mutual accountability, equal representation, flexible systems, and the continuity of partnerships.

> **What do we mean by Urban Climate Resilience?**
>
> In this paper Urban Resilience is meant as Urban Climate Change Resilience. Climate change is worsening the number, frequency and duration of natural hazards across the globe, making disaster risk reduction and resilience building pressing challenges. Informal settlements in urban areas are where the impacts of climate change are the most acute and strengthening resilience in these neighbourhoods represents a very complex and urgent challenge. Urban Resilience is the capacity of cities to adapt to crisis situations directly or indirectly related to climate change.
>
> *Ref. Pro-Poor Climate Action in Informal Settlements | UN-Habitat (unhabitat.org)*

Following, the partnerships are examined through **the lens of the feminist approach**, which seeks to promote social justice by transforming unequal power dynamics. It is evident that Oxfam's role in advocating for women-led projects and promoting local women's organizations through financial support and clear communication is positively recognized, as demonstrated by the SEA project's commitment to the importance of an integrated feminist approach. However, the paper identifies significant places where such an approach can be applied more successfully than at present and some concrete steps that Oxfam can take in this regard, such as playing an enabling role and amplifying the work of local women's organizations by making their voices heard more widely.

It is emphasized that multi-stakeholder partnerships encounter challenges in scaling up interventions and maximizing their strategic impact, which relies on the purpose and ambition of the partnership. Transparency, proactive communication strategies and MEAL are commonly regarded as the important tools to address these challenges. The SEA project evidences that complex partnerships with concrete objectives can be transformative beyond the achievement of goals, as it views the relationship between the public, civil society and nonprofit sectors from the perspective of "doing something together based on shared decisions".

Finally, the role of partnerships in building effective urban resilience is inspected. **Urban resilience is framed within the context of urban governance and sustainable development**. The role of local governments and international NGOs, such as Oxfam, in promoting resilient communities through effective development, planning, environmental protection and resource utilization is explored. The concerted efforts of many partners, including those involved in emergency/crisis management, development, local communities/civil society, and the private sector, are reviewed and cases from the SEA project are drawn. Oxfam emerges as a convener of many actors that can facilitate addressing urban issues, dialogue around clear and tangible solutions, and enabling the creation of spaces where government and communities can plan and implement together more effectively.

Part III, Conclusions and way forward: The main themes that emerged from the interviews are systematized, compared with some key propositions in the literature, and a set of conclusions and recommendations are provided. Recommendations address Oxfam's best position for forming multi-stakeholder partnerships and its added value in implementing joint integrated initiatives for urban resilience, contributing to strategic objectives achievement. The following recommendations are drawn: **(1)** Oxfam should promote and facilitate the establishment of gender transformative partnerships with a clear scope and unique value proposal.

(2) Oxfam should promote and facilitate the establishment of a partnerships that can address the multiple dimensions of urban resilience. **(3)** Oxfam should promote and facilitate equitable power relations in the partnerships and create the conditions for the voice of the most vulnerable to be heard.

Introduction

The purpose of this learning paper is to reflect on how Oxfam as an international NGO is best positioned to shape and be part of the **partnership in implementing joint integrated initiatives for effective urban resilience.** The paper reviews the current practices and challenges by recording the opinion of many stakeholders (inside and outside Oxfam). The decision to investigate such a theme draws on a twofold consideration:

(I) HALF OF HUMANITY LIVE IN URBAN CENTERS, AND THIS FIGURE IS PROJECTED TO INCREASE BY TWO-THIRDS IN A GENERATION, THUS HAVING A RELEVANT IMPACT IN TERMS OF INCREASED DISASTER RISKS AND LACK OF PREPAREDNESS.	(II) THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROCESS OF BUILDING URBAN RESILIENCE SEEMS INCREASINGLY LINKED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF MULTI-STAKEHOLDERS PARTNERSHIPS THAT CAN BRING TOGETHER DIFFERENT ACTORS AT LOCAL, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL, AND CREATE SPACES FOR SYNERGIES AND COMPLEMENTARITIES.

The privileged learning space is provided by the project **"SEA. Building Urban Climate Resilience in Southeastern Africa"** implemented by Oxfam in close collaboration with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), DIMSUR, the governments and selected municipalities of **Malawi, Mozambique, Madagascar, and the Union of the Comoros**. By engaging in a learning process, as a result of the implementation of the project, the paper aims to provide inputs for further reflection on the different partnership arrangements established at the local level where the project is currently being implemented. However, the input provided can help *stimulate a wider reflection on Oxfam's role in promoting and building partnerships for the implementation of specific initiatives*. In this regard, the colleagues of Oxfam and stakeholders from different regions with significant experiences on similar issues have been invited to contribute.

The learning paper does not necessarily seek to offer conclusions but rather to stimulate discussion and debate by identifying key issues and critical questions and presenting some working hypotheses and recommendations. As the ultimate goal is to **influence discussions among Oxfam staff and partners**, the learning paper focuses on lessons and implications for Oxfam actors. However, it could be a theoretical-practical contribution of interest to the wider humanitarian community on how to partner with regional institutions, national and local authorities to develop local disaster risk reduction, disaster preparedness and urban resilience strategies.

The **methodology** for preparing the learning paper included a review of key documents (a brief bibliography is listed in Annex I), interviews and discussions with a range of Oxfam colleagues, partner representatives and experts from donor community and other organisations (listed in Annex II).

The paper		
Part I **Literature review**	**Part II** **Framing multi-stakeholder partnerships**	**Part III** **Conclusions and way forward**
Highlights the importance of situating multi-stakeholder partnerships within a conceptual, analytical, and strategic framework.	Identifies and discusses issues and lessons learned in relation to five key elements of the effective practice: 1. Partnering in multi-stakeholder context; 2. Partnership and power relations; 3. Partnership and feminist approach; 4. Partnerships and scaling up of interventions; 5. The role of partnerships in building effective urban resilience.	Systematize the main issues that emerged from the interviews, compares them with some key propositions in the literature, and provides a set of conclusions and recommendations.

Literature review[1]

Oxfam defines *resilience* as the **ability of people to realize their rights and improve their well-being despite shocks, stresses, and uncertainties** (Oxfam, 2016c). For Oxfam, the main condition for contributing to the promotion of resilience practices is to **listen to communities with particular attention to gender and vulnerability situations, thereby contributing to the promotion of local ownership** (Oxfam, 2017, 23). In order to achieve the goal of fostering urban resilience, Oxfam emphasizes the importance of *systems thinking and transformative approaches* as preconditions for the full deployment of the holistic dimension of its interventions. However, these approaches can only be concretely applied if they are supported by a facilitating system that includes multi-stakeholder and multi-level partnerships and builds on collective action (Oxfam, 2021). Indeed, this poses significant coordination challenges with multiple levels of governance including the definition of roles and responsibilities: this form of partnership – although strategic and crucial – is largely unaddressed in the literature.

Throughout its history, Oxfam has always considered partnership as fundamental to its organizational identity, building on its potential to foster connections between different groups, ranging from governments to communities and civil society (Oxfam, 2019, 18, 19c). In 2012, Oxfam's partnership principles[2] were defined and implemented across its programs. In partnering with others, Oxfam defines its role as aiming to promote six main social change processes that enable and **support the promotion of a multisectoral and holistic understanding of resilience**: gender justice and empowerment, securing and improving livelihoods, informing, flexible and forward-looking planning, accountable governance, and learning (Oxfam,

> **Oxfam promote 6 main social change processes:**
> 1. Gender justice and empowerment;
> 2. Securing and improving livelihoods;
> 3. Informing;
> 4. Flexible and forward-looking planning;
> 5. Accountable governance;
> 6. Learning.

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[1] The references used for this literature review are included in the Annex 1
[2] https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/story/oxfam-partnership-principles_1_0.pdf

2016c). As multi-stakeholder partnership remains a key mechanism in Oxfam's work, the proposed approach is based on trust, respect for autonomy and equality (Oxfam, 2019, 91).

In addition, Oxfam has progressively deepened its capacity to identify and address unequal power relations can impact partnership building, while valuing the different forms of knowledge that can emerge in collaborative contexts (Oxfam, 2019, 24). However, there is at least a partial **misalignment between the organization's self-perception and others' perception of the organization as a partner** (Oxfam, 2019, 21). This is a phenomenon that deserves further investigation, particularly in the context of specific partnerships, such as those with local governments and institutions.

In any case, *partnerships with governments are a privileged engine for promoting transformative change,* as evidenced by the experiences gained through different projects, from which relevant lessons have been drawn, (Oxfam, 2016b). Indeed, from a multilevel perspective, Oxfam recognizes that interactions between authorities, institutions and citizens are the most urgent and relevant when addressing inequalities, forms of exclusions, power imbalances and vulnerabilities (Oxfam and Arco, 2016). As a result, local authorities – the closest level of government to citizens – are crucial actors in the fight against multidimensional poverty and inequality. From a theory of change perspective, **local actors and authorities should indeed be supported to lead and influence policies**, including through partnerships. Furthermore, since it is the government that sets the legal framework within which international NGOs can operate, working with government representatives can enhance the legitimacy and accountability of the intervention and promote sustainability. It also expands the room for maneuver in which Oxfam can operate, while ensuring greater effectiveness and paving the way for the scaling up and replication of successful models and approaches. **Any partnership between NGOs and government institutions can enhance the scaling up** along four different axes (Uvin and Miller, 1994): expanding the target populations or geographical areas, the content of the program, the level of intervention (regional or national) and growing the organization to operate at a higher level of complexity and capacity.

In addition, there are further benefits from a significant increase in Oxfam's visibility at the central level (see Oxfam, 2016b). There are also challenges in partnering with governments, which have their own agendas and may put forward priorities that do not reflect Oxfam's assessment of community or civil society needs. Concerns have also been raised that the added value of the partnership may be viewed with skepticism by the government, which on the contrary may be perceived as an erosion of state authority (GTZ, 2014). On the other hand, other research has shown the positive value of close collaboration and the significant interest of governments in preferring non-governmental intermediation instead of direct donations to the national budget (Munyangaju et al., 2021).

We can, therefore, conclude that the partnership between INGOs and governments should be given special attention and deepened, despite various challenges. **Lasting solutions can only be produced if fair and goal-oriented cooperation can be established**, which depends both on the NGO's ability to present itself as trustworthy and to avoid forced or opportunistic cooperation, and on the government's interest in converging on a common agenda in collaboration with the NGOs involved. Most importantly, it means that the cooperation must be based on **shared goals, and a shared willingness of pursuing a common path to achieve them** (see Pick et al., 2008). Although it is still an under-explored topic, studying this specific form of partnership can be a particularly useful learning exercise for scaling up INGOs interventions, especially in the area of resilience.

Framing multi-stakeholder partnerships

1. Partnering in Multi-Stakeholder Context

The following **key challenges related to the management and governance of multi-stakeholder partnerships** were explored: **(i)** exploring the key aspects of a partnership; **(ii)** Oxfam's perceived added value and comparative advantage; **(iii)** working with governments at different levels. The following paragraphs present the main reflections, key considerations and challenges related to these aspects as they emerged from the interviews. As explained in the previous section, it is clear from the literature review that there are different types of partnerships, that it is extremely difficult to define a multi-stakeholder partnership; and to make a clear distinction between different forms of partnership. It is recognized that *there is no one-size-fits-all rule for a successful partnership*. However, experience shows that innovation is key to "pull" actors with different roles, interests and mandates around common goals and within a defined context – such as that of building urban resilience -. Given this, the following paragraphs attempt to identify and discuss some **key principles and good practices for effective partnership.**

1.1 Exploring the key aspects of a partnership

While all interviewees seem to agree that multi-stakeholder partnerships require a high degree of flexibility, ownership, innovation and representation of a variety of sectors, there is a growing recognition that **a clear "strategic framework" is also needed**. The purpose of such a framework, based on the analysis of current or past partnerships would be to outline the "vision"

> *"Multi-stakeholder partnerships require a high degree of flexibility, ownership, innovation and representation of a variety of sectors"*

and the "roles" and to provide clear operational guidelines. Some interviewees recommended that such a strategy should be **developed through a process of multi-stakeholder debate and negotiation**, preferably during the program design phase.

> **Key components for partnership strategic framework:**
>
> - Providing clarity as to when a partnership approach is feasible/desirable;
> - Exploring the benefits and risks of (different types of) partnerships for Oxfam and its partner organizations;
> - Defining appropriate roles and responsibilities for governments and civil society actors;
> - Adopting an inclusive approach to the partnership and include a wide spectrum of actors, outlining the concrete benefits brought by each actor;
> - Establishing basic criteria and minimal requirements for partners;
> - Setting standards with regard to the monitoring and transparency of partnerships;
> - Describing good practices and lessons learned.

Some interviewees stressed the fact that the identification of partners should require the definition of specific selection criteria that go beyond the administrative and financial aspects[3]; including representation, organizational mandate, specific competencies, experience or resources, adherence to certain principles or values including safeguarding. As the partnership expands in scope and ambition to influence, **more rigorous partner selection criteria and ongoing screening of the partners will be required**. Similarly, Oxfam should share comprehensive information about itself with partners. Interviewees underlined the importance and – at the same time - the difficulty of assessing the legitimacy of certain CSOs and private actors in partnerships since their social and/or environmental modus of operandi

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[3] This approach is very well captured in "Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings DG ECHO guidance note", March 2023, [Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local responders in Humanitarian Settings (europa.eu)](#)

(or policies) could be seriously questioned. It is often observed that local CSOs, rather than international NGOs, such as Oxfam, are most likely to assess and exclude private actors from partnership on the basis of ethical considerations and lack of trust, while the current challenges in front of us and a (great) number of funding opportunities are requesting to involve the private sector.

1.2 Oxfam's added value in multi-stakeholder partnerships

Almost all agree that Oxfam's added value in multi-stakeholder partnerships is its **ability to convene partners around agreed outcomes and goals and to provide clarity on the roles and responsibilities** of each partner, although this has been described as an example of "easier said than done". Indeed, many partnerships have been reported to have failed from the outset to identify goals, expectations, and clear roles for each partner. Experience has shown that it is crucial to clearly **define the common purpose that brings partners together**. It was noted that a successful partnership should be based on agreed and co-designed interventions where the goals set can only be achieved together, but also where the specific and individual motivations and goals that bring the partners together are recognized and acknowledged.

In this context, **Oxfam is recognized as an organization well positioned to lead the process of "negotiation and alignment" between different actors**. This is probably due to fact that Oxfam is seen as an "unbiased",

"Participatory and inclusive approach – if not properly managed and controlled - may delay the convergence towards shared solutions and related decision-making processes. "

professional and "trustworthy" organization, with a strong vision and commitment to tackling poverty and inequality, as well as encouraging internal and external discussion, wider participation, and inclusion. However, it was also emphasized that a participatory and inclusive approach – if not properly managed and controlled - may delay the convergence towards shared solutions and related decision-making processes.

Oxfam's added value in partnerships is also seen in **its ability to bring about evidence-based transformative systems change** by creating space for communities to express and exercise their civil rights and also to work with and advise government; by giving recognition and visibility to – traditionally excluded – local communities and partners by creating space for them to be at the forefront of the discussions with non-traditional actors such as the private sector and government at local, national, regional and international levels.

However, it was argued that if Oxfam wants to remain relevant in the partnership for program development, it should **continue to monitor and invest in the quality of its work**; and – overall – question itself about the role it wants to play in the different partnerships.

Overall, **Oxfam's added value in multi-stakeholder partnerships for project implementation was recognized as a *bridging*, *facilitating*, and *enabling* role**. There are, of course, different opinions on the predominance of one or the other, as well as on the range of the functions that can be performed within the three roles. In fact, the three roles are inter-connected, and it is impossible to draw a line between the three:

- *Bridging* **role:** Oxfam's ability to bridge (i.e., reconcile) communication gaps between public institutions, communities, and individuals; to connect internal and external groups; and connect and coordinate different key stakeholders, including government and CSOs.

- *Facilitating* **role:** This is the role most often mentioned by the interviewees. Oxfam is seen as a convener (bringing together processes to tackle complex problems), an initiator (initiating pathways for social change) an advocate (in the process of formulating and implementing public policy; as well as raising community and political awareness), and in a few cases, an innovator (applying new solutions to solve old problems).

- *Enabling* **role:** Oxfam is seen as opening spaces and opportunities for capacity strengthening through education, training, skills development, and empowerment.

Within this frame of reference, Oxfam is recognized for its **ability to amplify and reflect the local knowledge and practices in different fora and platforms**. This is – as many have highlighted – part of Oxfam's strong commitment to advancing the "localization" agenda.

The picture that emerges is that Oxfam's added value, as an international NGO, is seen almost unilaterally in its *capacity to operate at different levels* (from local to national, regional and international) and to play different roles and interact with a variety of different actors from communities to CSOs, governments, the private sector, UN agencies and academia. This is undoubtedly its comparative value.

In a changing context, where communities face increasingly complex challenges with multiple social, economic, environmental and cultural dimensions, Oxfam is seen as a capable and relevant partner to address these issues effectively from different perspectives.

The role of *bridge-builder* - or *broker* - is often mentioned when referring to Oxfam's work in partnership with the governments. On the one hand, this bridging role is seen as crucial in assisting the government in providing basic services, as NGOs work close to the people and - can therefore organize the services efficiently by targeting those most in need. However, the interviewees do not see this Oxfam's primary role. On the other hand, **the bridging role is seen as being able to support the government in building relationships and networks with multiple stakeholders**, transferring know-how and – in some cases – expanding existing connections and linkages. This latter aspect is seen as the most relevant for Oxfam; its capacity to bring together diverse logics and different points of view among partners to integrate various resources and competencies into effective strategies that address to social, humanitarian and - increasingly - climate change challenges is indeed recognized.

According to most of the interviewees, this capacity is combined with a deep understanding of the root causes of the multidimensional poverty and socio-economic conditions in the areas where Oxfam works and is present. This allows Oxfam to easily bridge the communication gap between government and communities, small institutions, and the private sector.

The focus on **partnering with local government is seen by Oxfam as a way to increase the effectiveness of its programs** by ensuring that the transformative change is owned by the local actors and is – ultimately- sustainable.

The perception of the local government representatives is that Oxfam, like many other international NGOs, often develops an extended partnership with national governments while partnerships with local government are often project-based and only established when working in a specific local area of the country where the change is taking place.

Collaborative engagement between government, civil society and the private sector to reduce inequalities and address social and economic issues is recognized as a growing trend; however, the challenge of finding common ground and a consistent interest in partnership remains weak. Attention has been therefore drawn to the **need to create an enabling environment for formal partnerships between government and civil society organizations at all levels**, and for partnerships based on a mutual recognition of the role each actor can play in addressing local challenges such as lack of resources and capacity. In this context – as mentioned earlier - Oxfam plays a key role in convening different actors and coordinating the different levels, thus promoting a bottom-up decentralized approach.

2. Oxfam's Partnerships with local actors: sharing the steering wheel

Partnerships raise fundamental questions about the power held by each partner. Partnerships bring to the table existing power dynamics and related power accountability. This discussion often brings "fear" and uncertainty about how power is translated and reflected in partnership' roles, rights, and responsibilities. Fears and concerns vary and depend on how each member perceives their power/sphere of influence and how they evaluate the power/sphere of influence of others. Some partners may indeed fear that the partnership will weaken the regulatory role of intergovernmental bodies and/or undermine governmental authority or allow government to abdicate from its responsibilities or, quite commonly, that partnering with private sector actors may jeopardize the mission, values and reputation of NGOs. Lastly, the recent debate on decolonization raises new questions and issues about the reexamination of assumptions and practices that concentrate power and decision making in the hands of the most influential partners.

2.1 Sharing the steering wheel

There is an overall recognition of a **positive trend in all the countries where Oxfam works**: partners are increasingly taking over the lead in project implementation, or parts of it. However, an open debate and reflection on the power of each actor and how this can be reflected in clear roles, responsibilities, and

accountability within a partnership is rarely discussed. It is still considered as a "silent" issue because it is perceived as highly sensitive, but power dynamics are not a "dirty issue" or a nuisance. They have always existed and if they reflect different interests, they also reflect the different mandates of each partner. The key is how to make use of these dynamics for the advantage of shared goals that benefit the society at large, especially the most vulnerable.

Undoubtedly, partnerships remain the **testing ground for new models of governance and new formulas of "power's sharing"**; the way partners interact, share information and make decisions has important implications not only for the agreed outcomes of the partnership, but also for shaping new working dynamics and rethinking traditional "power" patterns. In this context, it is important to *encourage a collective reflection on power dynamics* among partnership members. Depending on the nature of the partnership, it may be useful (or, in some cases, necessary) to analyze the source of power that each partner brings to the table and to understand power imbalances as well as the comparative power advantage of each partner - which can be used to achieve the shared partnership goal- and to identify the strategy for leveraging the different levels of power that each partner controls.

Interviewees described the most common form of decision-making in partnerships as "informal consensus", i.e., based on what we may call a "silent consensus" where "less powerful" partners tacitly agree with "more powerful" partners.

This may require the **introduction of specific measures within members to counterbalance the power** and give more authority to traditionally less influential partners, such as establishing regulations to ensure that more resources are channeled to those with less opportunities and capacity to access them (resources), providing capacity strengthening measures, etc. Decision-making remains a privileged space where power is exercised. If **sharing the *steering wheel*,** the term used by some interviewees to describe the change**, is considered a key and non-negotiable step towards a process that allows the "passing of the power" to the lower level**; it is also perceived as a challenge as it requires the take over (by the grassroots organizations) of financial responsibilities and may therefore pose a risk to Oxfam, including reputational risk.

2.2 Changing power relations

As partnerships become more influential, and participatory, issues of changing power relations become both more important and more complex. A review of experience reveals considerable concern in this regard. Only **a minority of partnerships appear to have any formal mechanisms for addressing *power***. The notion of power relations is generally interpreted in a rather abstract way and is most often described as being based on "commitment" and "trust" as opposed to more formal measures of control.

Many interviewees stressed the need for more rigorous and systematic mechanisms for the decision-making process within the partnership with Oxfam.

When building partnerships, it is considered very important to explore the power of partners, their experience, their knowledge of the context and people's needs, and to bring to light their added value. **Investing in trust, learning by doing and reflecting on the differences** between a consultant/service provider and a partner seem to be good measures to be taken but still too traditional and not adapted to the changing context.

A first step in creating more equitable power relations is to *ask the question "accountable to whom?".* In many cases, partnerships seem to lack a clear vision of accountability obligations at both internally (among partners, who is accountable to whom?) and externally (to whom is the partnership as a whole accountable?) levels, including to the people with whom we work. Many interviewees commented that **issues of accountability are rarely discussed explicitly** in the context of the partnerships they know, even though they are key to addressing power relations. While these are not easy questions to answer, an explicit and participatory process of mapping relationships could be a valuable first step. Once accountability commitments have been mapped, the partnership (and individual partners) will be in a better position to

develop a strategy for working as peers. While accountability mechanisms should be tailored to the needs of individual partnerships (and may vary in their level of formality and complexity), many interviewees expressed the view that international NGOs and international donors have an important role to play in **establishing equitable standards and guidelines.**

Partnership is seen as moving from a service provider logic to mutual learning logic.

In general, the partnership is seen as moving from a service provider logic (contract based) to mutual learning logic (capacity strengthening, advocacy, and influence with the partners). In the medium term, **partners should then be able to make requests directly to governments** – a typical example - as they gain competence and independence. In this process, **Oxfam is expected to be a facilitator and not the owner of the project** which should be in fact owned by the community and the government. The concept of improved capacity is broad: financial management, internal organization, interaction with government and communities, monitoring, evaluation and learning, reporting systems, risk management and technical issues. The partnership in which Oxfam leads from behind and let partners lead from the front is defined as *transformative*. For Oxfam and partners, it requires a *joint effort to co-create and co-design* and to establish specific ways of working for accountability. The **transformative partnership** is generally seen as the most advantageous approach. The approach should also be blended between investing in expertise and capacity strengthening of local groups that can become sustainable NGOs on the ground.

The reflections that emerge are clearly related to the debate on the decolonization of aid, which involves a willingness on the part of local actors to disengage themselves from both top-down decisions and the 'global north'. However, it is not very clear, how this can be clearly translated into practice unless - as some say - the dynamics of how aid works are changed or undermined. Though there is a general sense that Oxfam is already taking positive steps in this direction by investing in ownership, shared thinking and mutual accountability between partners, ensuring equal representation at the decision-making table, building flexible systems and developing a continuity in the partnership.

3. *Partnerships and feminist approach*

The purpose of this learning paper could not be separated from a reflection on how Oxfam's feminist principles[4] relate to the role of partnerships. The purpose of a **feminist partnership approach** is the pursuit of social justice and the transformation of unequal power relations and dynamics that prevent women from developing their full potential and realizing their aspirations in society. Two main questions were considered:

- *Does Oxfam's approach in building partnerships have a clear stated goal of pursuing social and gender justice where the women as individuals and women as a collective become the drivers of the change rather than Oxfam?*

- *Is Oxfam able to develop partnerships by keeping the feminist principles and an inclusive feminist approach at the forefront of any action where the intersectionality of other factors such as ethnicity, class or disability that cause discrimination and reinforce unequal power and privilege are addressed?*

A number of considerations and challenges related to the application of these same principles during the implementations of projects were identified.

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[4] The 11 principles are: Power sharing; The personal is political; Feminism is a local-global movement; Nothing about us without us; Engaging with men and masculinities; There is no economic, social and environmental justice without gender justice; Diversity and inclusion – gender mainstreaming and intersectional analysis; Safety; Care and Solidarity; Development as Freedom; Elimination of all forms of GBV.

3.1 Partnerships, social justice and gender justice

It is widely recognized that in partnerships formed to implement a project the *"how things are done"* is **more important than** *"what is done"* in advancing a feminist and a social justice agenda. While for Oxfam, social and gender justice is generally mainstreamed in all programs and is increasingly becoming a central and much discussed issue, not all the institutional partners in a partnership may have the same strong feminist lens and approach or the same understanding, especially in relation to gender vs feminist.

Oxfam is often recognized by government institutions as a pioneer in its ability to apply a feminist lens to different issues and play the role of "bridge-builder" between different thematic institutional mandates when it comes to integrating a gender/feminist approach. This is a key "capacity" that should be strengthened to **raise awareness and provide knowledge on gender justice**. Local partners appreciate Oxfam's ability to open up discussions on issues that – in many cases – would be very sensitive for local partners to disclose publicly. Oxfam is valued for its ability to raise funds for stand-alone gender projects or for its capacity to **mainstream gender justice across different thematic areas.**

However, it was emphasized that the same Oxfam capacity to raise funds can lead to unequal and patriarchal ways of working between local organizations and Oxfam where the implementation of gender activities is translated into standardized capacity strengthening activities and/or pre-designed approaches that have very little to do with the key gender issues that need to be tackled and transformed ultimately. It was highlighted it is important for Oxfam to walk the talk and to not fall into the trap of seeing the "feminist agenda" as a box-ticking exercise.

It is not always easy for Oxfam to balance its power to open spaces, raise funds and facilitate the discussion around feminist/gender issues with its capacity to let women's organizations speak for themselves, to push the boundaries of a culture or a given context - that is often deeply patriarchal - towards a culture that enables and recognizes the potential that women bring to the society, to co-create and share knowledge among themselves. In this kind of partnership, Oxfam should rather play an enabling role by ensuring a steady and long-term flow of financial support/resources to women-led projects and amplifying the work of local women's organizations by **making their voices heard loud and clear on as many platforms as possible even globally**.

3.2 Further application of feminist principles in partnership development and urban resilience

A common lack of an intersectional, movement-based, solidarity approach is recognized in partnership development and urban resilience programs. Partnerships are often seen as to be constrained by formal arrangements and not exploring opportunities for looser forms of engagement with other actors in pursuit of social justice and gender justice goals. This reflects the need for those working in partnership building to consider how our partnerships fit into a wider "ecosystem" for change, including relationships with the international donor community. To achieve this, an analysis of how gender justice is linked to urban resilience is suggested, as well as **the application of key feminist principles at every stage of the partnership-building process**. The application of feminist principles is seen as central to building relationships.

Another issue that emerged in relation to the use of feminist principles when building partnerships is the **potential conflict between the desire to promote social change and the respect to the traditional culture**. According to some, gender work can be perceived as trying to impose certain ideas and community members can be offended when the issue of gender injustice is raised, especially when male privilege is emphasized. There is also a **resistance to hearing the "western ideas"** also because of the colonial past and the current

neo-colonialism – although the majority acknowledge this more or less explicitly. Given the fact that not all contexts are the same and that there are always many differences in culture and sensitivities not only between countries but also between different regions of the same country, it is very **difficult to generalize and to identify good practices that can be applied everywhere**. However, this difficulty is often linked to the need to promote cooperation and equality between men and women and to the need to *adopt a bottom-up approach that ensures the real inclusion of the voices of women or otherwise marginalized minorities*.

The **urban resilience theme represents a privileged space for advancing the feminist agenda**. As mentioned above, building urban resilience requires the integration of the different sectors that contribute - at different levels - to the creation of a resilient society. From the natural and built environment to risk reduction and management, from the governance to the social and economic system, these are the sectors on which resilience is based; and it is in the development, unfolding and integration of these sectors that a feminist agenda should prevail.

The SEA project demonstrates that an integrated feminist approach, across all of the above sectors, makes a society resilient while promoting structural change.

Involving women in construction works or in the waste management, sectors that have traditionally excluded to women and been considered inappropriate, has a powerful impact on changing perceptions of what women can and cannot do. Establishing, together with the municipality, the rules to employ the most marginalized and vulnerable group of women in private construction companies and set up systems where the work goes hand in hand with high-level training, while allowing women to work and perform their family duties, is transformative. The implementation of concrete and integrated projects through non-traditional multi-stakeholder partnerships is proving to be a sound basis for planting the seeds of a feminist empowerment culture at all levels.

Resilience is definitely a feminist issue, as women are usually the most affected by crises due to their socio-economic vulnerabilities in many parts of the world. They are the ones who often bear the burden of a family and community system that is not resilient. The urban space is then often not women friendly. Urban spaces – especially the urban periphery where the most vulnerable live – are not conducive to women's safety and security. This can be seen in the lack of urban transportation and unmaintained and poorly lit roads and bridges that become easily inaccessible, especially during the rainy season; a water drainage system that has never been completed and is often left open and used as a dumping ground; a natural environment that is not preserved and maintained because it is constantly affected by urban activities and high concentrations of people.

Urban resilience thus becomes an exceptional space for advancing the feminist agenda. The SEA experience shows how the decisions and processes promoted and implemented by the project partners through a gender equality lens support the building of resilience that is rooted in the communities and designed to generate socio-economic and environmental impact and sustainability.

4. *Partnerships and scale up of interventions*

Another challenge for multi-stakeholder partnerships is seen as scaling up interventions and maximizing their strategic impact. The type of potential impact a partnership seeks to achieve and will depend on its specific purpose and the level of strategic ambition will vary greatly from one partnership to another. According to the experience of the interviewees, there are many different types of partnerships. Some are set up with the explicit aim of influencing processes, institutions or actors beyond those directly involved in the partnership, while others are more narrowly focused on the implementation. Experience shows that some multi-stakeholder partnerships are much more effective than others in achieving a scaling up effect. The following are some of the most common considerations that focus on **maximizing the strategic impact of partnerships and avoiding them becoming an experiment disconnected from broader processes**.

4.1 The role of partnerships in the replicability of good practices

Many interviewees stressed the **importance of transparency and proactive communication** strategies as key tools for accountability and scale up. Particularly in the absence of more formalized accountability mechanisms, ensuring that all relevant information about partnership processes, decisions and activities is made available in a timely, understandable, and accessible manner, is seen as very important.

Another important strategy discussed with interviewees is to **stimulate and strengthen "demand" for scale-up.** Several interviewees commented that effective scale up largely depends on the active interest and engagement of internal and external stakeholders. While there are externally driven processes that are beyond "our" control, partnerships can potentially take steps to stimulate and build demand for scale up by emphasizing and supporting connections between partners and investing in building the capacity of stakeholders to hold the partnership accountable for scale up.

Effective partnerships are seen as able to break down the barriers between different stakeholders and create a common understanding of the lessons learned and how to replicate them. In this way, starting from a joint analysis of the problems and getting stakeholder on the same page about their needs can help and increase the ownership. **Investing in joint learning exchanges, joint reviews and reflection**s during the project implementation as well as being present where conversations on urban resilience are taking place and mapping emerging

A large number of interviewees see the main problem not so much in the lack of resources but in the lack of a common culture and practice with regard to the collection and formalization of good practices

stakeholders are also seen as key actions to be pursued. Partnerships can help develop a more holistic approach and incorporate different points of view.

Finally, the **development of performance standards and stronger monitoring, evaluation, learning** and reporting requirements were recommended as necessary steps to advance the role of partnerships in replicating good practices and ensuring a management for results commitment. Only a minority of partnerships appear to have provisions for *independent* monitoring and evaluation. Most programs use different approaches to monitoring and evaluation that is very different from others, making it difficult to use and disseminate the key achievements for management, learning, accountability, and communication purposes. Very often, as the common experience shows, this part of the work is underfunded, although a large number of interviewees see the main problem not so much in the lack of resources but in the lack of a common culture and practice with regard to the collection and formalization of good practices. The importance of systematizing such practices is generally stressed. Many agree that Oxfam has an important role to play in promoting and monitoring such standards for MEAL.

Multi-stakeholder and multi-level partnerships that show impact should pave the way for replication and scaling up across different sectors. However, learning about how partnerships are established, how they gradually evolve and how they achieve impact at different levels and across thematic sectors is rarely reported and properly reflected in MEAL. Indeed, it is much easier to focus on the end results of a partnership than on the partnership process itself, such as the relationships between partners, the communication system that have been adopted by the partners, etc.

The SEA project has shown that **partnerships around an agreed upon concrete goal are complex to manage but they have the highest potential to be transformative beyond the achievement of the final agreed partnership goal**. The spin-offs generated by the partnership process are indeed far-reaching; the SEA project shows that it is not only the resilient concrete end results that the partnership progressively achieves in the different countries, that are the most important, but also how we get to these results counts. In fact, experiments and tests new dynamics of engagement among partners and – as such –contributes to imagining **a new way of horizontal and vertical governance that is more inclusive and integrated** and builds on the different partners' comparative advantage. Last but not least, these elements support the sustainability of the intervention.

The SEA project frames the relationship between government, civil society and the private sector in a different perspective; not that of "consultation", but that of *"doing something together based on joint decisions"*. The need to achieve a concrete common objective, such as building roads and bridges and ensuring their sustainability, has required joint planning, joint analysis of the challenges, joint implementation, and joint sustainability plan. Indeed, <u>the SEA project has pushed all partners to rethink their approaches and to reconsider them from a different perspective</u>:

- *The private sector, forced by the project to employ the communities, has to adapt its procedures to more flexible and less business-oriented and time-saving systems;*
- *The government used to not having resources and therefore not taking care of the sustainability of the interventions, comes to an agreement with the community and the private partner for the maintenance of the interventions;*
- *The community, used to not being in the management of the public administration, better understands the challenges that the local government has to face and the bureaucracy that lies behind so many decisions.*

Within this frame, Oxfam's role is to document these partnerships through the elaboration of MEAL framework; to link the learning derived from these partnerships to the policies and strategies to the inclusion and participation policies and strategies that underpin many national governments through an evidence-based approach; to show how **global commitments should and can be implemented through partnerships** that have concrete objectives of horizontal integration, vertical inclusion and blending of different skills and competencies.

5. *The role of partnerships in building effective urban resilience*

Urban resilience is seen as closely linked to good urban governance and sustainable development. As such, **urban resilience is seen as an important outcome of good urban governance at the local level**. In this context, urban governance is confronted with multiple and complex issues such as waste disposal, early warning systems, human mobility, housing, unemployment, sanitation and water purification, electricity, road construction and maintenance and other challenges associated with rapid urbanization. In general, urban resilience interventions are seen as **sustainable development interventions** that are mainly

implemented through these service delivery programs. Local governments are generally responsible for promoting sustainable livelihoods and ensuring urban resilience.

Given the close relationship between urban governance and urban resilience, many interviewees agree that local governments should promote resilient urban communities through effective development and urban planning, environmental protection, and the optimal use of resources. Urban resilience is generally considered to apply not only to big cities, but also to towns and smaller settlements, such as the ones where the SEA project is

Local governments should promote resilient urban communities through effective development and urban planning, environmental protection, and the optimal use of resources.

being implemented; however, many explain that **urban resilience cannot be easily defined due to its different dimensions, contexts and applications.** Some interviewees emphasize spatial planning dimensions, while others focus on the decentralization of power, local entrepreneurship, economic development, and participation in local decision-making processes.

Oxfam – and NGOs in general – come into the picture as urban resilience is seen as **focusing on the role of local partnerships to promote socio-economic, environmental and political development within urban communities.** This can be done by applying urban resilience principles and providing technical expertise. Many agree that Oxfam can contribute to urban resilience by supporting urban governance as an umbrella concept that aims to improve areas with people-centered economic growth, social development and protection, poverty reduction, and the protection of the environment.

Building urban resilience requires medium and long-term and integrated approaches to urban planning where different sectors, perspectives, and mechanisms, should come together to explore viable resilience pathways. It is therefore an area that requires strong stakeholder partnerships and – as such – the spaces where the power, resources, and accountability that each partner brings in relation to the resilience outcome should be well understood and trade-offs need to be explored where necessary.

Oxfam's capacity to influence (power) and convene has been recognized by institutional actors as a comparative advantage when it comes to resilience partnerships. Within this 'inside the building" approach, Oxfam is therefore well positioned to bring about transformative change towards a more transparent, integrated, inclusive and responsive government. It has the "power" to **break down institutional silos and barriers** by facilitating the creation of platform where different departments begin to work together for resilience. In fact, Oxfam is able to transcend institutional boundaries and processes and easily facilitate - at local level - the **creation of an enabling environment for resilience** that is conducive to the implementation of integrated resilience initiatives. This paves the way for discussions on what a resilience governance should look like, and for pushing the government to move from words to action in implementing good governance.

PEOPLE-CENTERED
ECONOMIC GROWTH

PROTECTION OF THE
ENVIRONMENT

CONTRIBUTE TO URBAN RESILIENCE BY SUPPORTING URBAN GOVERNANCE TO IMPROVE

SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT

POVERTY
REDUCTION

However, as confirmed by many interviewees, it is not always easy for Oxfam to balance its power of being influential, internationally recognized, well-resourced and skilled with the other aspect of its power, which is related to being part as well of the civil society space and being locally based in countries where the lower ranked CSOs are not well represented, and their voice is not always heard. *The risk of overshadowing communities and grassroots organizations is high.* Oxfam's commitment to localization by shifting the power to local partners has been acknowledged. However, many questions arise, especially in key thematic areas as urban resilience, where the **transformative change should occur simultaneously at institutional level and local level**. Oxfam is therefore challenged to play its role in both the institutional and

local spheres and to use its power differently according to the different actors (institutions, private sector, and local civil society/communities).

The SEA project shows that Oxfam can facilitate the integration of different sectoral departments, both local and national, by bringing them together around a very clear resilience outcome and, while **creating concrete opportunities for engagement between communities and local government**. The implementations of complex resilience projects at the local level that clearly fall under the mandate of the local governments, – at the same time have a very strong effect on the target the communities in reducing climate risk. The project has allowed Oxfam to play its power as a convener of different actors who rarely meet to discuss urban issue, as a facilitator of the discussion around concrete and tangible outcomes and as an enabler by creating spaces where government and communities plan and implement together. This process is paving the way for a new paradigm of resilience building, where the power of each stakeholder is recognized and positively harnessed and where change occurs.

The private sector – which combines high technical expertise with a business-oriented approach – is generally seen and involved as a service provider and not primarily as a partner. With an unusual dynamism and integrated approaches, its involvement in the SEA project makes the **private sector more aware of the importance of its role in addressing key climate system issues**. It requires high level expertise, and (more aware) of the need to build partnership for a common *"beneficial to all"* objective. It has been observed that the private sector that "does business" with local communities and government allows these actors to share their technical and professional power for the benefit of vulnerable communities and tends to gradually reduce their business-oriented approach.

The implementation of concrete resilience initiatives that create new positive power dynamics is also the testing ground for new evidence-based policies in the framework of good governance. Resilience thus becomes a governance and development issue. As the SEA project shows**, building urban resilience requires the concertation of different partners**, from emergency/crisis management actors to development actors, from institutional to local communities/civil society and private partners. This process involves a wide range of actors who bring their power and comparative advantage to the table, creating a potential "win-win" space for all.

Conclusions and Way Forward

Given the limited nature of the research and sample, the conclusions and way forward presented here are indicative rather than conclusive. However, the people who have contributed to this work, both Oxfam staff and others, are professionals with long experience in the Region in the sector of DRR, DP, urban resilience,international cooperation and umanitarian work either in the field or at the headquarters, in the target countries and in other parts of the world and come from a variety of backgrounds, making the set of contributions certainly qualified. The purpose of this chapter is to present some conclusions that the authors believe can be drawn from the views expressed, along with a possible way forward and key recommendations for Oxfam and other humanitarian actors. They aim to provide an answer to the question:

How can Oxfam, as an international NGO, best position itself to shape multi-stakeholder partnerships, and what is Oxfam's added value in implementing joint integrated initiatives for effective urban resilience and contributing to the achievement of Oxfam's strategic objectives?

> **Recommendation 1 - Oxfam should promote and facilitate the establishment of gender transformative partnerships with a clear scope and unique value proposal.**

The importance of partnerships in building effective urban resilience is undeniable. Without multi-stakeholder partnerships, many of the positive experiences and good practices identified by the interviewees would not have been possible. Moreover, the **number and effectiveness of such partnerships has been steadily increasing** in the urban resilience programs. However, as has been highlighted, there is still much room for improvement. Many of these partnerships are still ad hoc (i.e., project-based) or have a focus that is either too specific to have significant impact on change or too broad to be effective. **Partnerships should therefore be developed systematically**, so that they contribute to a more long-term and sustainable impact with a clear statement of added value. This requires many actions to be taken in partnership initiatives at different levels and stages, and a clear focus that is specific enough to support concrete action and broad enough to have a significant impact. Finally, a successful partnership requires a **high level of shared awareness of the limits** of partnership in order to avoid disappointment and misunderstanding among the partners and the relevant stakeholders.

Without multi-stakeholder partnerships, many of the positive experiences and good practices identified by the interviewees would not have been possible

Urban resilience. Given that continuous development of urban resilience partnerships has become the norm, not only because partnerships need to evolve continuously to achieve their goals but also because **each urban context is unique** and responds to a wide variety of needs, a robust set of skills is required. Oxfam's added value can be seen in facilitating partnerships that can:

- *Respond to these needs and deliver long-term sustainable impact (social, economic and environmental) jointly defined with the partners involved;*

- *Present a unique value proposal;*
- *Have clear roles and responsibilities with credible arrangements for accountability established.*

Oxfam is well positioned to support and facilitate the definition of a common purpose, outcomes, roles, and responsibilities between the parties involved. Oxfam can also play a key role in ensuring that there is clarity about the objectives of the partnership, the power dynamics, and the roles and responsibilities of all partners, as well as ensuring that lessons learned are fed back into the planning phase in order to ensure sustainable effectiveness in the medium and long term.

Learning and scale-up. The way Oxfam influences partnership-building can also have a significant impact also on the **scale up of good practices and lessons learned**. Partnerships with a clear scope and unique value proposal can adopt easily the scale up strategies discussed during the interviews: transparency and proactive communication, stimulating the "demand" for scaling up among the partners, harmonization of goals, strong MEAL systems and procedures in place. The selection of scale up strategies for a specific partnership would then be based on the recognition of the different capacities of each party and the importance of context-specific factors.

Partnership co-lead. This does not mean that all strategies are equally valid. There is a need to think more innovatively from the outset about the forms of *partnership*, the management styles and structures, the types of information that will inform their new roles they will adopt and the **mutual learning process** that will be established to **ensure scale-up and sustainability**[5]. Clearer conceptual and measurable frameworks need to be developed for analyzing relationships between NGOs, governments, grassroots, or community organizations and other local actors, the types of federations and networks they might join, the gains and losses of adopting different strategies.

Gender justice. In its role of "convener", Oxfam should also play a key role in **facilitating the establishment of gender transformative partnerships**. Taking the feminist principles into account when building a partnership is the very first step towards achieving social justice, transforming unequal power relations in the society and building relationships of trust. This requires **adopting a "feminist" approach at every stage** of development work by analyzing: how things are done in the partnership, what is being done, what resources are being used and produced, who is involved and who is not, and how decision-making works. Some key lessons that emerged to make Oxfam's approach to partnerships more transformative and intersectional are:

- Always *promoting the maximum involvement of local women's organizations, networks and associations representing the interests of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups, not only in case of gender justice programs.*
- Advocating *for flexibility in partnership arrangements to take into account the ability of "weakest" partners to participate, rather than strict compliance with partnership arrangements.*
- Adopting *transparent and inclusive decision-making processes, and regularly assessing whether there is a meaningful circulation of learning among partners.*
- *Co-creating, co-reviewing and openly discussing power imbalances.*

Recommendation 2 – Oxfam should promote and facilitate the establishment of a partnerships that can address the multiple dimensions of urban resilience

This recommendation brings together a number of aspects that emerged from the interviews and which can be traced back to the importance of good urban governance in promoting effective urban resilience. The role that Oxfam can play in this context is multifaceted and at the same time highly sensitive.

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[5] It includes social, economic, environmental and institutional dimensions.

Sub-national authority. Working with local government is probably the most relevant and effective form of partnership for urban resilience. **Local government is at the forefront of all urban resilience planning, management, and service delivery, including dealing with citizens**. It is also the foundation for implementation on which the regional and global partnerships rely on. Examples of such local partnerships making valuable contributions in leveraging good urban planning and management of existing local resources are undoubtedly constitute the common heritage of many colleagues involved in this learning paper. However, it seems that accountability is the most difficult issue to resolve, partly because it involves assigning responsibility for failure to deliver.

Bridging. While it is clear that the ultimate accountability must remain with the government, some level of accountability should also be assigned to civil society parties as well, otherwise there is not any guarantee that the skills and resources that such partners have pledged for programs will be available and used according to the appropriate objectives. In this context, Oxfam's role can be to **promote a community empowerment approach** and to play the *bridge-builder* function with greater awareness, promoting mutual clarity with respect to the sphere of responsibilities and accountability for urban resilience, not only with the government but in broader framework of the partnership.

Holistic approach. Another aspect that is certainly related to addressing the multiple dimensions of urban resilience is the *ad hoc* nature of working with the government, most often with the local government. A relatively wide range of possible relationships with public authorities is considered part of Oxfam's experience. However, this wealth of experience is not accompanied by a rationale and is almost never formalized into medium and long-term partnerships.

DRR partnering. It is worth noting that a multi-stakeholder model has been integrated into all relevant global and regional standards, such as the Hyogo Framework for Action and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030[6]. The International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction Partnership, facilitated by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), specifically advocated for an **inclusive, multi-stakeholder and shared responsibility approach to disaster resilience and risk reduction**. As a result, a wide range of collaborative partnerships between different levels of government, and between governments and the civil society sector have emerged around the world. Such global standards, although more related to the work of UN agencies, confirm and somewhat formalize the need to engage governments in working on urban resilience. Formally recognizing the importance of this relationship, making explicit the role Oxfam intends to play and structuring the partnership relationship within the framework of a **precise, broad and long-term strategy**, is a recommended way to address the multiple dimensions of urban resilience.

Co-production. Another aspect to prioritize is ensuring that programs are designed and implemented in close collaboration with the governments and aligned with national policies at the local and sub-national levels. The reported good practices illustrate that **achieving impact and sustainability through the public sector at scale requires building a genuine, two-way and mutual learning partnership**. Building a true partnership requires putting national and sub-national governments and citizens at the center from the earliest stages of program design. The role proposed here for Oxfam is to explicitly monitor, learn and ensure that the any strategic direction taken by the partnership is in line with local policies and, more broadly, the overarching urban resilience guidelines at country level in order to address multidimensional poverty and inequality. At the same time, Oxfam can pay special attention to the primary stakeholders and the way they are involved: **urban resilience-oriented partnerships may include formal and informal stakeholders** with limited power and resources, located in poor contexts.

Ensuring that programs are designed and implemented in close collaboration with the governments and aligned with national policies at the local and sub-national levels

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[6] Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 - 2030 (un.org)

The analysis of the above elements shows **how crucial the definition of the partnership is to the exercise of power**. In the creation of the partnership, a variety of power issues within the whole *aid machine* converge, making the analysis of how partnership is linked to power relations closely related to the current – and complex – debate on *decolonization of aid*. In the context of this learning paper, a key question that seems to underlie the different views is whether the asymmetrical power relationships, based not only on the ownership of financial resources but also on many other more or less subtle aspects, precludes equitable partnerships.

Local needs driven. Most interviewees report experience of excellent working relationships within the partnerships they have been involved in, although the degree of linkage and collaboration varies over time and in specific contexts. However, it is questionable whether there is a genuine sharing of skills, responsibility and accountability, and also whether these relationships generate the kind of synergy which is considered to characterize true partnerships. On closer analysis, it seems that even a partnership that is generally considered satisfactory, *healthy*, and responsive to identified needs has room for improvement in terms of power relations.

Power balance. More generally, it should be also considered that one of the effects of a *partnership* is the adaptation of a sound theory of change that serves to transform the existing power asymmetries of the stakeholders into opportunities for the implementation of the program activities and the achievement of its results. In the context of an approach that seeks to **reduce power asymmetries**, it becomes **fundamental to understand how power processes operate within and between organizations and individuals** in order to promote a shared knowledge of how determinants of power translate into actual power in that specific context. Particularly in urban areas, power is clearly a structural phenomenon but the perceived imbalance can begin to be understood and harnessed by examining the relationship between structure and agency within and between parties. On a larger scale, power is seen as inherent / integral part to the structural framework of development and in the dominant discourse between different entities / actors, including that of partnership, which could actually be seen as reinforcing power asymmetries.

The recommendation suggests that Oxfam should look not only at power asymmetries between parties as constraints to partnership, but also at the *broader framework within which these parties operate, with a view to create the conditions to shed a light on power imbalances, promote and build a more equitable distribution of power in relationships with partners for long-term programming, humanitarian responses and influencing actions*. Sharing the steering wheel, changing power relations, promoting gender transformative relations, supporting mutual accountability are raised as key learnings of the partnership role in building effective and long term urban resilience, from the SEA project implementation.

Annexes

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

OXFAM

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