HOW DOES NETWORKED CIVIL SOCIETY BRING CHANGE?
A meta analysis of Oxfam Australia projects and practices
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In Oxfam's Worldwide Influencing Network, partnerships of all shapes and sizes support progress towards strategic goals to mobilise 'the power of people against poverty'.

Often these are multi-organisational partnerships, operating under the shared banner of a network, coalition, alliance or other terms that imply collective action. Many projects use networks as a foundational step for further action and influence, on the assumption that networks will be more effective in bringing about policy and social change than organisations working alone.

But this assumption, though widely and reasonably held, is not well mapped or validated. Much of the existing information on networks focuses on operation rather than outcome. Resulting social change is projected rather than measured. There is a gap in knowledge about what networks achieve that is different or better than single-voice influence.

Recognising this, Oxfam Australia commissioned meta analysis of a small sample of its projects where building networks was the main approach. The key questions to be answered in this review were:

- How do networks that partner with Oxfam participate in political process to achieve policy and practice that benefits people?
- What does **change** look like, when it is delivered by a coalition, network or alliance?

THE REVIEW FOUND:

- Within the sample, it was **always a good idea** to implement influence strategies through collective networked action; however, it was not always possible to conclude it was a **better idea** than more direct partnership or influence.

- Networks partnering with Oxfam did not always aim explicitly to participate in political process; for many, the goal was to strengthen civil society participation in decision making, starting with partner civil society organisations and non-government organisations.

- Networking brought strong and consistent advantages to network members of reach, credibility and capability. These advantages were used not only towards the shared agenda but also to enhance individual organisational objectives.

- Some networks showed a clear shift in participation and power towards previously under-represented groups. However, it was difficult for networks to monitor and map policy and practice change as a result of these shifts. In most cases, it had not yet occurred.

- This constrains the ability to answer the second question of the review: what does network change look like? Without improved monitoring and evaluation practices that can extend beyond the project cycle, it will remain difficult to prove the assumptions about networked action as a conduit for inclusive political participation.

A STARTING POINT FOR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT NETWORKED ACTION

'Development is about power and its progressive redistribution from the haves to the have-nots.'

Winnie Byanyima,
Oxfam International Executive Director, 2013

'Oxfam believes that it is only through the collective effort of many actors (civil society, women's rights organisations, government, trade unions, religious institutions, private sector, and others) that our goals can be achieved. Each of these actors has a role to play in accordance with its responsibility, legitimacy, capacity, and strengths.'

Oxfam Worldwide Influencing Network Strategy, 2013

'There is a strong underlying assumption … that with a strong civil society will come the capacity and capability to contribute to positive development within a country context.'

Linda Kelly and Chris Roche,
in Partnerships for Effective Development,
ACFID 2014

'Advocates who use (coalition) theory believe that policy change happens through coordinated activity among individuals and organizations outside of government with the same core policy beliefs.'

Sarah Stachowiak, in Pathways to Change:
10 Theories to Inform Policy and Advocacy Efforts,
Centre for Evaluation Innovation, 2013

METHODOLOGY: SELECTING AND ANALYSING THE PROJECTS

Oxfam Australia selected projects for the meta analysis based on three criteria:

- They demonstrated networked action
- They had achieved at least interim results against their goals
- They had sufficient existing documentation (case studies, mid-term reviews, evaluations) for a desk review to be relevant

In total, 17 projects were selected. Their components were filtered into summary groupings that considered:

- Context: the starting point for networked action, including social and political elements and the associated challenges for shifting power to include civil society more equitably,
- Mechanisms: the purpose and structure of the networks, and the tactics used by each to bring about desired change.
- Outcomes: including direct outcomes on policy, but also progress towards a strengthened and inclusive civil society.

Six of the projects in the sample were selected for closer inspection through case study, based on the diversity of their goals, sectors, approaches and outcomes. For these, the best way to illustrate how change happened was to describe it.

HIGHLIGHT CONCLUSIONS, CONTEXT

How do networks bring change according to their setting?
Interviews with project staff identified benefits of working in networks over individual organisations acting in their political landscape, namely:

- **Neutrality from political factions**
  Where political factions were strong, all local agencies were subject to accusations of bias. A network involving an international NGO was less likely to be accused of political leanings. This allowed an impartial, yet locally driven, rights-based stance.
- **Government preference for networks as partners**
  Similarly, in contexts where local organisations struggled to maintain perceptions of impartiality, governments often preferred to work with a network over an individual agency, to avoid accusations of favouritism in the civil society sector. Governments were also more likely to accept research and policy briefings prepared by multiple agencies, as the risk of bias or inaccuracy of findings was lessened.
- **Strength in numbers for visibility and protection**
  In contexts of restricted freedom of speech, operating as a network provided visibility and shared responsibility for what was being said. Actions and opinions could not be assigned to any one organisation. This was particularly beneficial for local CBOs whose members sometimes faced significant risk speaking out directly.
- **Government as a network member**
  Sustainability and success of the network was greatly enhanced in some cases by including government as a member. As well as demonstrating to the public and partners that political will was in place, this tactic guaranteed legitimacy and government endorsement of research and policy outcomes. In some of the more

restrictive contexts, government inclusion was mandated.

- **Data and analysis the government can use**
  In some contexts, networks were more effective in sourcing and reporting population data than government. This brought great value to governments in terms of data mining and analysis. While organisations were also providing this service as sole agents, working together on data led to broader reach and more targeted policy advice than organisations were achieving in isolation. This was true across all contexts, but particularly the case for interconnected district or provincial networks where the information was of use to mid-level and national governments.
- **'Watchdog' advantages of international/local combinations**
  In contexts of high corruption perceptions and / or low press freedom, monitoring government process was difficult and controversial. By working with, and funding, local NGOs and CBOs, Oxfam had greater immunity from accusations of an imposed international agenda, while local partners had a central and somewhat protected hub for sharing observations.

CONTEXT OBSERVATIONS
Overall, 16 out of 17 projects were operating in settings where press freedom was restricted and corruption perceptions were high: two contextual elements that form barriers to civil society inclusion and influence. The review found that working through networks had advantages in these contexts, often linked to 'strength in numbers' or to the combination of international and local agencies working together as one.
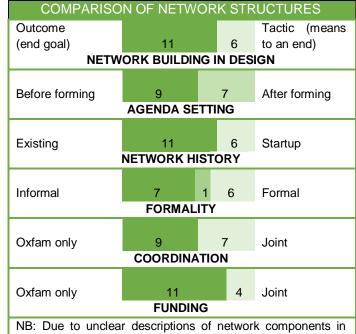
HIGHLIGHT CONCLUSIONS, MECHANISMS

How do networks bring change through their actions?

The analysis sorted network activities into five categories: mobilisation; media and messaging; research, evidence and expertise; 'insider' advocacy; civil society empowerment. The first three consistently benefited from networked action. The final two also showed advantages to working in networks, but it was difficult to conclude whether these advantages were consistent compared to actions and support from individual organisations.

Advantages of mechanisms using networked action:

- Mobilisation: Reach and community ownership of public mobilisation increased. Safety and political neutrality was assured to a greater degree than with individual agency action.

- Media and messaging: Network members shared relationships for broader coverage including journalism, local radio and public service announcement (PSA) channels.

- Research, evidence, expertise: Through pooled research, knowledge around the shared agenda was more representative and current than an individual organisation was likely to achieve.

- Insider advocacy: Networks opened doors for discussions to start and placed local partners as credible voices in those discussions. Members brought new connections to benefit joint action. A united voice strengthened compulsion to act.

- Empowering civil society: The scope and volume of support available to local organisations increased when they were involved in networks, but so did expectations of their performance in partnership.

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COMPARISON OF NETWORK STRUCTURES		
Outcome (end goal)	11	6	Tactic (means to an end)
NETWORK BUILDING IN DESIGN		
Before forming	9	7	After forming
AGENDA SETTING		
Existing	11	6	Startup
NETWORK HISTORY		
Informal	7	1	6	Formal
FORMALITY		
Oxfam only	9	7	Joint
COORDINATION		
Oxfam only	11	4	Joint
FUNDING		

NB: Due to unclear descriptions of network components in some project documents, the number in comparison does not always add up to the full sample of 17.

- Naming conventions: The most common term used was 'network'. These groups were slightly more likely than others to operate informally, to be startup groups and to offer members advantages beyond policy achievement. However, forums, alliances and coalitions also showed these traits.

- Purpose: Nine networks existed to strengthen civil society for political inclusion, seven to drive specific policy change and one for learning and coordination. Crucially, *purpose in design does not always reflect purpose in reality*. Networks evolved to reflect all three purposes to some degree, given time.

- Network building – tactic or outcome: While many projects in the sample were building networks as a tactic to achieve project objectives, the majority saw network building as a project outcome in itself, in line

with the assumption that networks would sustain civil society engagement in pro-poor issues over time..

- Agenda setting and policy goals: Seven of the 17 projects set their agenda *after forming*. This was more likely when network building was a project outcome. In these situations, the group needed to be active before moving to joint problem definition.

- Network history - existing or startup? Projects were more likely to start up networks than to support those already existing. However, even in startup situations, CBOs were usually already working with each other and with Oxfam. Project funds made it possible to draw these partners together in new ways.

- Network size: Ranging from three through to 1200, the networks in this review demonstrated good functioning and results at all sizes. However, the larger networks needed more time for coordination and administration to maintain quality connections.

- Network formality: For this analysis, formality was defined as having a Terms of Reference in place. It was more usual for networks to remain informal, which staff believed contributed to responsiveness. However, groups operating under a Terms of Reference including division of roles and responsibilities saw this formality as absolutely essential to functioning effectively.

- Coordination: Staff highlighted a central coordination point as vital. It usually fell to Oxfam, particular at the beginning of projects and with startup networks. As networks stabilised and matured, trust between partners allowed for Oxfam to step back and for local organisations to share or take over coordination roles.

- Funding: Few networks were accessing funds beyond Oxfam, and only two were collecting member contributions. This may reflect a need for greater efforts to shift perceptions of Oxfam as a donor, rather than a partner, in strategies for influencing.

What does network change look like?

Project outcomes: Networks delivered change in inclusion, gender empowerment, local and national policy, with the most common change being inclusion.

16	12	11	10
Inclusion	Policy - local	Policy - national	Gender

Inclusion: meant that marginalised or under-represented groups were more visible in decision making systems and structures as a result of network action and interaction, for instance: people at risk of land development, people living with disabilities, women and young people.

Gender: meant results for women including and beyond greater inclusion, such as enhanced community status, access to personal development and knowledge networks, better protection from violence in homes and communities.

Policy – local: meant that policy or implementation of policy at local level was positively influenced by network action, with the likelihood of future social change as a result.

Policy – national: meant that policy or implementation of policy at national level was positively influenced by network action, with the likelihood of future social change as a result.

How did networks contribute to pro-poor outcomes?

Staff taking part in interviews were asked how a networked approach contributed to outcomes in ways that an individual approach might not have done. They identified the following attributes:

- **Empowerment and profile for local organisations**
  Empowerment of local CBOs and community voice was fundamental to influence. In networks, capacity building in its usual, operational sense – training and skills mentoring – was often not required due to the high quality of partners already working in the target sector. Rather, empowerment for local organisations was about taking a more visible role than previously, or forming sub-groups of specialised skills and interests to push relevant organisational priorities.

- **Vertical and horizontal reach into geographically isolated local issues**
  Oxfam engages with local partners for implementation of community-based activism and empowerment work. Connecting these partners together multiplied the geographical reach for monitoring and reporting at national level. This built an evidence base that reflected community level imperatives in national level policy. It became more feasible for national policy influence to be driven by local data and insights; in reverse, local organisations had resources to drive local mobilisation and change. A further benefit, particularly for strengthening local organisations, was the sharing of experiences and lessons between agencies working in different settings on common agendas.

- **Magnified sense of movement and support**
  Networking the voices and actions of organisations or individuals in more than one location created a perception of civil society movement and demand greater than it may have been in reality: what is known in campaigning terms as a 'buzz'. This was further enhanced by connection and motivation between networks operating locally, so that they too felt they were part of something larger than their own scope of work.

- **A single voice; a united front; a long-term entity**
  Relationships built within networks in the sample were solid and long-term, not only with Oxfam but with each other. Members were like-minded to start with. Staff talked about goodwill, enthusiasm and passion as drivers for sustained joint action. Networks could show a united front with consistent messages and calls for change. All networks in the sample showed intent for long-term collaboration and expansion, and some were exploring alternative funding mechanisms in recognition of project expiry dates.

INCLUSION: ONE KEY LESSON

Local groups working on environment, disaster resilience, land rights and gender have enhanced the skills and confidence of community members to become involved in discussions and decisions on these issues. This can happen across a range of Oxfam projects, not only those operating through multi-agency partnerships. However, there are three tiers of vocal empowerment, and raising community voice is only the first. Beyond this, networks between local and national influencers are assumed to be of particular importance for carrying voice into the next two tiers: hearing community, and responding to community.

Much of the documentation provided did not highlight the extent to which this occurred. Mapping change and information flow is not a standard question for project documentation so, where significant national level policy change has occurred, project documents make it appear as if member organisations at that level have largely done the talking. This comes with risks of dilution, imposed agenda or poor accountability to face emergent issues.

Talking to staff, it became clearer that local to national data flow has indeed been a powerful attribute of vertical networks, representing community voice even though community members are not physically at the table on national negotiations. There are two implications to this: firstly, that project reports and evaluations would benefit from more confident articulation of vertically connected civil society; and secondly, that examples of this theory in action may be more prevalent than documentation suggests. **Local-to-national influence is working**, and merits its own specific research as a followup to this broader meta analysis.

GENDER: ONE KEY LESSON

Gender networks presented innovative and impactful cross-sector models for change. Compared to other projects in the review, these types of networks blurred the lines between civil society organisations and individuals. Based on the assumption that woman leaders would claim their place in local and national structures of power and begin to deliver policy that benefited women and girls, building women's capacity for leadership was a project objective, and networking a tactic. Leadership components of training, mentoring and assistance to join relevant civil society or political organisations provided a pathway for women, while network components gave women support, knowledge, insight and motivation to work towards personal goals and gender outcomes.

Essentially, this strengthened individuals in order to strengthen CSOs, a reversal of the theoretical assumptions within the meta analysis that CSOs strengthened civil society. Though this model does not quite fit with other descriptions of networks or their change theories, **undoubtedly these women are networking, and benefiting from it in ways that a leadership programme on its own could not offer**.

POWER: ONE KEY LESSON

Interviews with project staff highlighted a challenge for Oxfam and other international NGOs working on civil society participation, that the coordination and funding they bring places them in a position of power. Ideally the relationship between Oxfam and local partners is about transferring this power into the hands of people and organisations who can best direct it for community benefits. At times this power is also used directly, particularly in national advocacy influence. Actors at this level are removed geographically and socially from the local civil society organisations they seek to empower and may be skipping a key step in the theory of change for strengthened civil society.

However, there were times when expertise advocacy, by Oxfam directly or in coalition with other national-level partners, was the most effective approach. Pressure on government was rapid, targeted and maximised specialist skills and reputation held by international actors. According to the review sample, it also brought large-scale results, often quite quickly, while networks more aligned with the principles and assumptions of civil society leading the way faced a more circuitous route to change, and often had greater difficulty in demonstrating their progress. **It can never be presumed that one pathway has an advantage over the other**; the decision on whether to use or to transfer power is a fundamental starting point for Oxfam's participation in networks. How Oxfam uses its influence may also change throughout the project, responding to emerging needs and opportunities. It is not always possible to plan for this upfront, which heightens the importance of communication and input among network members on Oxfam's role.

NETWORK CASE STUDY SUMMARIES

PROJECT	OVERVIEW	STANDOUT CHARACTERISTIC	ONE KEY LESSON
Vanuatu Civil Society Disability Network (2013 - 2014)	The Vanuatu Civil Society Disability Network focused on increased representation of disability issues in decision making. It built confidence of different organisations and leaders within them to take up spokesperson and negotiation roles.	GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP: Inclusion of different government ministries in planning contributed to the speed with which the network achieved recognition and success in disability-inclusive policy.	PART OF OXFAM'S ROLE IS TO FILL NETWORK GAPS: Oxfam project design showed intent to build capacity, but in fact it was not needed. Organisations in the network were highly capable and engaged in their field; what they lacked was coordination and a full sector view. Oxfam's main role has been to identify policy moments for the network.
LISTEN Pakistan (2013 – current)	Leverage Women's Rights in Social Transformation of Elected Nominees (LISTEN) created a member organisation that connected women with political and civil society process locally, at district level, nationally and regionally.	MAGNITUDE AND DIVERSITY OF MEMBERSHIP: LISTEN connected women of all backgrounds, from doctors and lawyers through to home workers, across 30 districts. In total, 1200 women are a part of the LISTEN network.	NETWORKING INDIVIDUALS STRENGTHENS CIVIL SOCIETY: Staff observed that networking women leaders has had exponential impact on women's empowerment and confidence, compared to other projects which have trained and mentored, but not connected, women.
People's Alliance on the Right to Land (PARL), Sri Lanka (2011 – current)	The People's Alliance on the Right to Land (PARL) played a significant role in land tenure cases against the government. It continues to mobilise and advise communities, and to work nationally towards resolutions and policy protection on compulsorily acquired land.	LOCAL, ORGANIC DEMAND: From the beginning, PARL has been responsive to demand from local communities and their newly formed CBOs. It provides legal advice on an ongoing basis, where needed. Thus, as well as a national network, PARL is a direct service provider to vulnerable communities.	ACTIVISM OPPORTUNITIES CHANGE WITH CONTEXT: When government changed in 2015/16, agencies accustomed to working under restrictive conditions needed to adapt and learn how to operate in a different context. Members showed strong intuition and collaboration in this transition. As a result, the new government recognised the land rights agenda as a pressing social issue.
Close the Gap Campaign, Australia (2006 – current)	The Close the Gap campaign is intergenerational, designed to sustain 25 years of advocacy and technical advice to government to improve the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Australians.	PUBLIC RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT: Using proven health statistics to show the inequality of health status between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the Close the Gap campaign gained rapid recognition and support. Over 220,000 people have signed the Close the Gap pledge.	INTERNAL LOBBYING HELPS WITH INCLUSION OF EMERGENT ISSUES: In lieu of a full 25-year policy roadmap, members have needed an adaptive approach, with regular reflection and realignment of interim goals. In a network of this size (45+ members), internal lobbying has helped to heighten network support for particular issues such as mental health or disability.
India Responsible Business Forum (2015 – current)	The India Responsible Business Forum (IRBF) is working on a long-term strategy for encouraging businesses to meet guidelines for accountability and transparency. The forum liaises directly with representatives of India's Top 100 companies.	TRANSPARENCY WITHOUT 'NAMING AND SHAMING': IRBF pulls together public domain information in a way that can be easily accessed and compared by civil society, including media and workers' rights groups, who then leverage the data as they see fit.	NETWORKED ACTION AND DIRECT ACTION ARE INTERDEPENDENT: As well as contributing to the IBRF, each organisation continues with connected CSR initiatives - for instance in Oxfam's case, community-based supply chain research. Project staff highlighted this mutuality of coalition and direct work as an asset to achieving goals.
Timor-Leste Land and Inclusive Development project (2016 – current)	Originally aiming to fill the gap of community mobilisation in negotiations on inappropriate government land development, the LID project quickly developed a broader agenda: civil society partnership with government on economic development strategies and policies. It brought together two local and two national networks, to strengthen their coordination and joint advocacy.	ADDRESSING CAUSES OF LAND ACQUISITION: Networks associated with LID started out protecting communities against government land acquisition. While this remains important, the networks now seek a deeper role in decisions on land development in line with economic policy – the cause – as well as land acquisition – the symptom.	NETWORKING THE NETWORKS ENCOURAGES LOCAL OWNERSHIP: There is no one 'LID network'. Rather, Oxfam is supporting local networks to grow and formalise as independent entities in two municipalities. These networks operate independently of each other and of the national-level alliance of organisations, but their connections to other organisations and levels helps them with skills and information for more effective influencing strategies.