PROMOTING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

What have we learned from 10 case studies of Oxfam's work?

By Duncan Green

I got married very young. I didn't know that women could sit and talk to people the way that we are doing right now. We had shadows in our eyes. But now we talk even to local authorities, and even to the military.

Female member of a Community Protection Committee in Kalega, Eastern Congo

It seemed a distant dream for bureaucrats, media and even civil society, that communities could negotiate and get CFR [Community Forest Rights] titles over hundreds of hectares of land in Chhattisgarh.

Oxfam India staff

This paper pulls together insights and lessons that arise from 10 new case studies of Oxfam's work in promoting active citizenship. The case studies, written over the course of 2013/14, employ a 'theory of change approach' to explore how change happens in different contexts. This summary also briefly reflects on the challenges to using that approach. The case studies were chosen to cover a wide range of programmes, both in terms of geography and sector (humanitarian, long-term development, advocacy and campaigns). They are:

- **Power and Change: The Arms Trade Treaty**
- **The Chhattisgarh Community Forest Rights Project, India**
- **The Chukua Hatua Accountability Project, Tanzania**
- **Community Protection Committees, Democratic Republic of Congo**
- **Advocating for Gulf Coast Restoration in the Wake of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: The Oxfam America RESTORE Act Campaign**
- **The Indonesia Labour Rights Project**
- **The 'We Can' Campaign in South Asia**
- **The Raising Her Voice Global Programme**
- **The Raising Her Voice Nepal Programme**
- **The Raising Her Voice Pakistan Programme**

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PROGRAMME DESIGN

A number of common elements emerge from the studies in terms of how to design effective active citizenship programmes. They include:

The right partners are indispensable: Whether programmes flourish or fail depends in large part on the role of partners, usually local NGOs or civil society organizations, but sometimes also individuals, consultants or academics. Good partners bring an understanding of local context and culture (especially important when working with excluded minorities such as the tribal peoples of Chhattisgarh); they often have well-developed networks with those in positions of local power – crucial for brokering negotiations with citizens' groups. And they will remain working in the area long after the programme has moved on – investing in partners is an investment in the future.

Starting with power analysis: Promoting active citizenship means building the power of citizens, starting with their internal 'power within' – self-confidence and assertiveness. In the case of 'We Can' in South Asia, building such 'power within' was almost an end in itself in tackling violence against women. Elsewhere, citizens went on to build 'power with' in the form of organizations that enable poor and excluded individuals to find a strong collective voice in confronting and influencing those in power. Taking this 'back to basics' approach has led to some impressive progress in what are apparently the most unpropitious of circumstances (women's rights in Pakistan, civilian protection in Eastern Congo).

A theory of change can help: In the Raising Her Voice programme, developing and modifying a cross-country theory of change helped the process of reflection, enabling country programmes to spot gaps and learn from each other. In general, an explicit discussion on power and change helps programmes and partners identify a wider universe of potential tactics, partners and approaches.

Building the grains of change: The case studies demonstrate that the exercise of active citizenship is often built on collective organization. Marginalized individuals in any society are weak when isolated; coming together can transform their influence. Building such organizations is about much more than simply promoting protest movements. Historically, social movements have been 'granular': on closer inspection, short term surges in active citizenship are made up of myriad 'grains' – longer-lasting organizations that span everything from faith groups and trade unions, to sports club fans or funeral societies. Success in building active citizenship usually involves identifying and working with existing 'grains', or building new ones, such as the Women's Leadership Groups in Pakistan, Community Discussion Classes in Nepal, or Community Protection Committees in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These groups are best placed to weather the storms of setbacks and criticism, and provide the long-term foundations for activism, whether as channels of information, sources of mutual support, or as expressions of collective power.

The importance of broad alliances and coalitions: Who should the grains engage with? Change is often achieved by engaging and if possible, allying, with a range of stakeholders on any given issue. A rigorous initial power analysis is essential to reveal the range of possible allies, but, in general, the broader the range, the better: work on violence against women and women's empowerment has made it a priority to work with men; sympathetic arms firms were critical allies in the campaign to win an Arms Trade Treaty; building

relationships with conservative evangelicals and Republicans in the Deep South paved the way for success in a campaign to ensure the fines from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill truly benefited local communities. Talking and working with such 'unusual suspects' is more difficult and time-consuming than simply finding 'allies like us', but is often critical to success.

Individuals and relationships matter: Processes of change are driven by real people, not faceless masses. In practice, there will be some individuals on both sides of the negotiating table (or barricade) who are more able and willing to understand the dreams and demands of all sides, and more interested in seeking change and compromise. Other individuals will have 'hidden power' in the shape of critical, behind-the-scenes influence. Identifying, understanding and building relationships with them, whether they are Adidas buyers in Indonesia or military commanders or traditional leaders in DRC, is an essential part of making change happen.

Building active citizenship takes time: Establishing the grains of organization is painstaking work, requiring sustained investment of time and empathy. There will be setbacks, disagreement, changes in direction. The end result may bear little resemblance to the initial plans. Many of the timelines for the case studies show work stretching back over a decade or more – far longer than the typical NGO funding arrangement. This poses real challenges both to funders and 'implementers'. One approach is to agree a 10–20 year 'envelope' for a programme, and then try and fund 2–3 year modules within it, in which the long-term direction of the programme shapes the content and approach of the constituent components.

CHOOSING PROMISING TARGETS

Successful exercises in building active citizenship often show one or more of the following characteristics:

Quick wins: Embarking on a ten year process with no certainty of victory is daunting. Success, however small (for example the reinstatement of sacked union activists after a strike, or previously marginalized women becoming sources of advice and expertise in their communities, or a brother no longer insisting that his sister brings him food and drink), boosts the spirits and prepares people for the long haul. This is even more the case when, as with the tribal peoples of Chhattisgarh, there have been few previous examples of the authorities listening to communities on anything. By identifying such quick wins from the outset, targeting them, and celebrating those that are achieved, programmes can build momentum early on.

Implementation gaps: While some programmes have lobbied for new laws, many of the case studies targeted the gaps between existing rules and practice. Those in power cannot argue that the citizens' demands are unrealistic or wrong (they are already on the statute book), clearing away some of the obstacles to success. On women's empowerment, South Asia's rules on quotas of women in various decision-making bodies offer an enticing target. In Indonesia, Oxfam made an explicit decision to work within the existing legal framework, out of recognition of its identity as an outside organization.

Windows of opportunity: Change processes are seldom steady. Long periods of stagnation and stasis are punctuated by sudden spikes of activity, protest and change.

These are often linked to 'shocks', whether political, economic or environmental. New constitutions, decentralization processes, elections, floods in Pakistan, even an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, all serve to shake up existing power relations and alliances, and make new movements and conversations possible. Successful programmes plan around such windows where possible, or spot and respond to them rapidly as new ones open up.

ENGAGING WITH STATES

Much of the work in the case studies revolved around helping citizens engage with the state to obtain the things they need – services, accountability, and security for example. Success in working on women's rights in the Raising Her Voice programme in countries such as Pakistan seems to be easier at local level, where the imbalance of power is less extreme and relationships are easier to establish. In Indonesia, women's participation and project activities have resulted in participatory budgeting taking place for the first time in villages in the project areas.

Effectively engaging the state means understanding its internal structures and incentive systems in order to identify potential allies (for example on community forest rights in India) as well as foes. Publicly congratulating officials and politicians when they do something right (rather than immediately moving the goalposts and issuing new demands) can help build trust. Framing demands in ways that make sense to politicians, whether local or national, can greatly improve the chances of success, as the BP campaign found in lobbying for local hiring (a vote-winner for local politicians) in the Southern US.

In Tanzania, engaging with local states has mirrored the wider evolution of work on 'good governance' and accountability, in which an initial focus on 'supply' (typically training officials to do better, on the flawed assumption that that would result in greater responsiveness) gave way to 'demand' – organizing groups of citizens to campaign for better services. The Chukua Hatua project found many local officials keen to comply, but largely unable to do so due to lack of knowledge or capacity. In the end, a joint approach, bringing citizens and sympathetic state officials together to find solutions to common problems, seems to hold the most promise.

However, some citizenship programmes have gone beyond the local state. In Nigeria, Raising Her Voice supported a women's rights coalition to draft a Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, which was adopted as the government's preferred means of domestication of the African Union's Women's Rights Protocol, and the supporting Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) bill, which was passed into law in March 2013.

COMPLEXITY AND SYSTEMS THINKING

The political and social systems within which active citizenship programmes operate are typically complex. That means that outcomes are unpredictable (however good the analysis), and attributing any given change to a particular cause is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Programmes aiming to 'surf the wave' of change in such systems have to become adept and comfortable with dealing with such unpredictability. That means, among other things:

Design for complexity: Chukua Hatua in Tanzania is perhaps the most explicit example of consciously designing a project without knowing what is going to work. By adopting an evolutionary 'venture capitalist' approach, the project supported a number of parallel accountability 'start-ups' for an experimental phase, and then scaled up the most successful.

Encouraging flexibility: Tanzania was not the only example of working in a way that is compatible with complexity. One of the additional advantages of building 'grains' such as women's groups, is that they can react to fast changing situations in ways that could never have been envisaged by project planners. In Pakistan, the Women's Leadership Groups responded to devastating floods by campaigning (with some success) for the rapid restoration of identity papers lost in the waters (essential for claiming state benefits). Similarly, 'We Can' programmes in different countries adapted a core approach to local conditions in terms of structures and alliances. Tanzania's Chukua Hatua programme found that in one region, an opportunistic approach of supporting community struggles worked best, while in another, a steadier, more continuous approach was adopted.

Letting go: In a similar vein, reminiscent of Robert Chambers' urging to 'hand over the stick', once groups of citizens have a sense of their own rights and power, and are organized, it is highly unlikely that they will 'stick to the script' as set out in the project concept note. In Nepal, Community Discussion Classes went viral, spreading to neighbouring villages without the involvement of the programme, and Community Discussion Classes began to set up savings groups. NGOs and funders must learn to surf the wave of their responses, even when doing so poses some risks (as when women in Nepal decided to smash up village bars in protest at alcohol abuse).

A GENDER LENS

The case studies provide ample evidence of the power and effectiveness of many Oxfam programmes in 'putting women at the heart of all we do'. This is clear for the explicitly gender-based programmes, such as 'We Can' or Raising Her Voice, but a conscious gender component underpinned (and was key to the success of) many other programmes, such as labour rights in Indonesia or Protection Committees in DRC.

In order to effectively address gender issues, a full power analysis including issues of 'power within' is essential, along with an exploration of both formal and informal relationships of power in a given community.

OXFAM'S VALUE ADDED

All over the world, groups of citizens are coming together to demand change. What is the added value of an international NGO like Oxfam getting involved? The case studies highlighted some possibilities:

Linking and inspiring: Programmes like Raising Her Voice organised exchanges between country programmes, leading to cross fertilization of ideas, and new senses of possibility. Even within the same country, exchanges in India between tribal communities and others who had secured progress on forest rights provided crucial momentum and self-belief. Such

peer-to-peer contacts are more suited to complex systems than attempts to distil 'best practice' across multiple different contexts.

International action: Lessons flow out of the country as well as in. Experiences from working on labour rights in Indonesia influenced the shoe and garment industry across Asia.

Research: Well-designed research played vital influencing roles in a number of programmes (Arms Trade Treaty, Gulf Oil Spill, Indonesia Labour Rights, Raising Her Voice in Nepal), enhancing legitimacy in the eyes of decision makers, as well as enabling better decision-making on the evolving nature of the various programmes. Local CSOs often have weak research capacity, while academic institutions often struggle to communicate their work with impact, so an INGO can use its research and communications capacity to plug the gap and build local capacity.

Advocacy: In Pakistan, DRC and more obviously, in the case of the Arms Trade Treaty and Indonesia labour rights work, Oxfam's national and international presence enabled it to strengthen advocacy for public policy change, reducing the risks of backlash from those who feel threatened by change. Often, however, it is quite hard to distinguish between what is 'long-term development' and what is 'advocacy', or even (in the case of the DRC) what is 'humanitarian' – head office and funding silos are not always relevant to work on the ground.

Branding: In some programmes (e.g. 'We Can'), a deliberate decision was made to minimize the level of Oxfam 'branding' and ensure maximum space for local organizations. Elsewhere, however, an association with Oxfam provided a degree of international backing and legitimacy that reduced risks for local organizations.

CHALLENGES AND WEAKNESSES

The case studies also revealed a number of dilemmas, weaknesses and other examples of what NGOs euphemistically prefer to call 'challenges':

Working with faith groups: Poor people in most countries place enormous trust in their religious institutions, which are often central to the construction of norms and values, including those that promote (and inhibit) active citizenship. In some programmes, organizers have responded by reaching out to religious leaders and institutions. For example in the BP oil spill campaign in the US, conservative evangelicals played a crucial role. In Tanzania, Chukua Hatua belatedly recognized and built on the prevalence of religious leaders among its animators. The Aurat Foundation in Pakistan arrived at a nuanced and thought-through approach (working with progressive Islamic scholars, but avoiding religious leaders). In other cases, however, a secular 'default' in Oxfam's work has meant not engaging properly with faith leaders on issues such as the Arms Trade Treaty, which would on the face of it seem a natural and promising arena for collaboration.

Can you do active citizenship without addressing jobs and income? Trying to make income-generating schemes work can devour the time and resources of a programme, but ignoring the importance of income risks alienating people who are desperate to improve their material conditions. Moreover, as Raising Her Voice found, activism costs at least some money, and low incomes can be a deterrent. Raising Her Voice initially decided to focus on non-income related organization, arguing that Oxfam was already spending heavily on

livelihoods work. It subsequently reconsidered, as it became clear that income generation was a priority need for many women in its programme. In DRC, initial efforts to include income generation were abandoned because they didn't work. In Pakistan, Women's Leadership Groups from the outset worked to link women to sources of credit and grants.

Long-term sustainability: The eventual legacy of three or five year programmes is a permanent source of discussion in aid work and these case studies are no exception. Will they generate longer-lived organizations, or strengthen the enduring 'grains' of society? In Nepal, Community Discussion Classes continued in the aftermath of the end of funding, but it is too early to say what lasting presence they will have. Alternatively, will they leave behind new rules and procedures? For example, the Arms Trade Treaty, the rules governing the spending of BP fines in the Gulf States, and the freedom of association protocol in Indonesia. In the end, the only way to find out would be to come back in 10 or 20 years and have a look; an exercise that almost never happens in the aid and development world.

Conflict versus cooperation: Serious change is seldom entirely peaceful, but conflict carries huge risks for poor people, whether physical or material (for example, being cut off from sources of patronage). In the most high risk environments (Pakistan, DRC, 'We Can'), programmes opted explicitly for a 'softly softly' approach. Elsewhere, for example Raising Her Voice programmes in various African countries, an insider/outsider combination of cooperation with allies, mixed with confrontation and protest where necessary, proved more effective. In Nigeria, successful advocacy for the passing of the 2013 Violence Against Persons Prohibition Bill, led by Raising Her Voice partner WRAPA[1], included hiring a former legislator to navigate the corridors of power, text message barraging of Ministers and highly publicized mock tribunals. Elsewhere, conflict came in the form of a backlash from those politicians affected by the work. In Tanzania, Chukua Hatua activists suffered arrest, intimidation and imprisonment. In the end, context should determine the blend of approaches, based on a balance of impact and risk.

Formal politics: The world is not neatly segregated between acts of citizenship and formal politics. The two inevitably leach into each other, posing challenges to programmes who are concerned about 'contamination' from the formal political world, which in many countries is associated with clientelism, corruption and coercion. In Nepal, political parties quickly identified and tried to recruit the fledgling women leaders – the programme in the end had no option but to try and equip them with the means to judge and manage the interaction. In Pakistan, the programme embraced formal politics from the beginning, building support networks between women political leaders. In the end, a purist separatist stance is only likely to frustrate emerging leaders and stifle the development of citizenship.

Funding, evaluation and value for money: Many of the programmes studied relied on 'good donorship' – donors that were willing to take risks. In Tanzania, DFID funded an experimental approach without pre-agreed outcomes. The success of Raising Her Voice grew partly from a five year funding agreement (also with DFID), which allowed time for experimentation, failure, learning and redesign.

The demand to demonstrate results and value for money puts particular pressures on active citizenship work, where attribution is hard to prove and most (if not all) evaluation is qualitative (often seen as second best by donors). The key seems to be in developing genuinely rigorous approaches to evaluation and 'counting what counts', which is an area

where the case studies seem to show considerable room for improvement. Even basic information, such as the total cost of a multi-year programme involving several phases and different donors, was often hard to acquire.

However, there are also some promising experiments, for example in the use of 'outcome mapping' to analyse the impact of accountability work in Tanzania, or the use of comparator (non-programme) villages to assess the impact of women's empowerment work in Nepal.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE APPROACH

The author approached each case study with a standard set of questions (see annex). Each study was written through a combination of interviews with relevant staff, reviews of programme documentation and email exchanges over drafts and follow-up questions. In some cases, partners were involved in this process. Drafts were posted for comment on the From Poverty to Power blog. Time and money prevented actual visits to programmes, although the author has visited some of the programmes ('We Can', DRC, Chukua Hatua) in the past.

Positive results of the approach include:

- Building a timeline proved a useful aid both to memory and analysis, and a collectively agreed basis for subsequent discussion.
- Asking for an explicit power analysis helped fill in the context for programme design (often missing from more nuts and bolts type summaries).
- Similarly, asking explicitly about 'critical junctures' jogged people's memories to some extent.
- Although blog comments were relatively few, some added significantly to individual case studies.

In practice, the subheadings and questions were perhaps a little over-complicated, and were simplified in the final versions of the case studies (e.g. amalgamating the various elements of the theory of change into a single header).

Overall, the author found that staff were generally reluctant (especially when they didn't know him personally) to air too much dirty linen, in the shape of failures, internal disagreements and course corrections. In the end, the point on the importance of relationships and trust applies just as much to writing the case studies as running the programmes themselves!

That reluctance may have been compounded by case study selection, which explicitly sought to 'learn from success'. NGOs may well be particularly reluctant to look at 'warts and all' on the faces of their iconic success stories.

CONCLUSION

By ranging widely across Oxfam's work, this exercise in comparison has produced some thought-provoking findings in terms of improved programme design and more effective 'ways of working' and staff cultures. It has also identified some of the recurrent dilemmas in promoting 'active citizenship' through aid.

This exercise was conducted with a minimal budget, with the only contribution being staff time. If the author was to conduct this process again, he would probably insist on spending more time and money, especially on country visits to build trust and uncover what has been left out of the standard reports.

Given the difficulty in excavating the often-chaotic and unpredictable paths that eventually lead to success, a different approach – real time accompaniment, might be even more successful. If programmes are accompanied by 'flies on the wall' in the shape of periodic visits from researchers, facilitated discussions with staff and partners etc., a much more honest and comprehensive account of 'how change happens' is more likely to emerge.[2]

ANNEX: GUIDANCE QUESTIONS ON CASE STUDIES OF HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

Duncan Green, April 2013

Starting Point

What change did Oxfam seek? Where/how did the idea originate? Was it specific (e.g. improving livelihoods for X women) or systemic (changing government policy, prevailing norms)? Was it primarily economic, political, social or a combination?
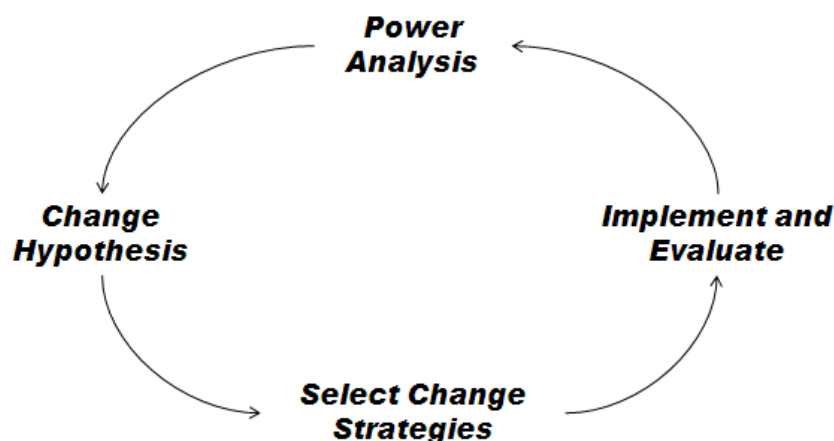
The remaining questions help you work your way round the power and change cycle, which helps in analysing a wide range of change processes (see graphic)

Power Analysis

What was the nature of the *redistribution of power* involved in the change? Was it primarily about 'power within' e.g. empowering women to become more active social agents, 'power with' (collective organization) or 'power to' (e.g. supporting CSO advocacy)?

What was the power analysis of the *key forces driving/blocking* such a change? What economic or political interests were threatened/promoted by the change? Which groups were drivers/blockers/undecided? Was their power formal (e.g. elected politicians) or informal (traditional leaders, influential individuals)? Was it visible (rules and force) or invisible (in people heads - norms and values) or hidden (behind the scenes influence)

Which *individuals* played key roles, either as allies or opponents?

Change Hypothesis

What aspects of (or changes in) political, economic, social *context* made the desired change more or less likely (e.g. functioning institutions, political leadership, new technologies, new threats or opportunities)

What was the *hypothesis for how the change was likely to come about*? What alliances (e.g. with sympathetic officials or politicians, private sector, media, faith leaders or within civil

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society) could drive/block the change? What tactics were likely to work best (cooperation v conflict, research v street protest)?

What were the pivotal moments/*windows of opportunity* (e.g. new governments; changes of leadership; crises and scandals; election timetables)?

Change Strategy

What was *Oxfam's role* in promoting change? As an active player or supporting partners? One programme approach, or advocacy/programme only?

Who were our *partners* – were they '*usual suspects*' (local civil society organizations and NGOs), '*unusual suspects*' (private sector bodies, local/national government, faith leaders) or a mixture of both? What was Oxfam's contribution e.g. helping them develop a clearer theory of change; bringing partners together with other actors to build alliances; building particular aspects of their organizational capacity; funding?

Implement and Evaluate

What did we/partners *actually do* (as specific as possible, please!)

What was *unexpected*? Few change processes go according to plan (although we often rewrite them to make them look that way!) What unforeseen events or realizations (e.g. that something wasn't working) led to a change of approach? How did the original plan change as the work developed? Were there unintended outcomes and impacts?

Were there *early wins* that helped build confidence and momentum in the work?

Looking back, what would you have done differently?

How did you *monitor and evaluate* impact? What evidence can you provide to persuade someone who questions whether your actions actually led to the change described?

What are the top lessons you would draw from this experience for development workers in other contexts?

NOTES

[1] See http://wrapanigeria.org/ (accessed 10 October 2014).

[2] See for example, http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2013/12/11/getting-academics-and-aid-workers-to-work-together/ (accessed 10 October 2014).

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

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