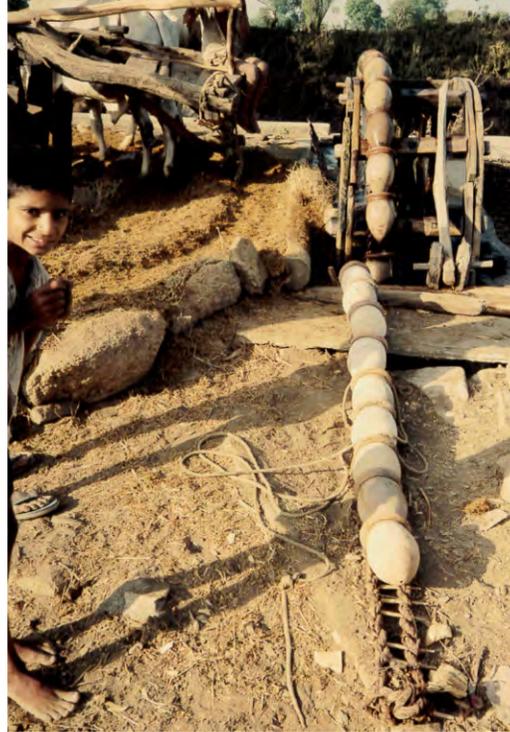


EMPOWERED DEVELOPMENT IN POOR COUNTRIES

The trials and trails
of a development
aid worker

JOHN S. AMBLER, PH.D.





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Indonesia, West Sumatra, Lintau, (1985) buffaloes puddling the soil before transplanting rice. *John Ambler*

This book is dedicated to the people of Lintau Buo, West Sumatra, Indonesia, whose patience and openness were extraordinary, and whose ability to protect the past and simultaneously embrace the future makes them a truly modern society.

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FOREWORD

I invite you to join John Ambler as he reflects on his 35-year journey in development work.

I first met John in the early 1990s when he was working for the Ford Foundation in Indonesia. We later worked more closely when he was based in India and I was working in Bangladesh. We had more than geography in common: we were both Cornell alumni, mentored by some of the same professors. In many ways we were kindred spirits—part of a generation inspired by the call of John F. Kennedy to public service. As we came of age there were ample opportunities for young Americans hoping to change the world. John was one of those who sought and found such opportunity in the villages of Southeast Asia.

From our first encounter, I was struck by John's ease in navigating the complexities of culture as an outsider. It was quickly evident why: he dug in deep. He learned local languages and took pleasure in exploring their nuance and subtleties. He believed that language was the window to the soul—and that engaging the soul was critical to the success of development efforts. He asked lots of questions and became a lifelong student of cultural norms and how they shaped daily life. He witnessed extreme poverty in the villages of Southeast Asia, but he was also seduced by the beauty he encountered there. He was captivated by the skill of local craftspeople—especially those who produced textiles—and he became an avid and skilled collector. As a volunteer and later as an employee with an Indonesian organization, then the Ford Foundation, CARE, and Oxfam, John continually struggled—like all ethical fieldworkers—to show the relevance and impact of his work. He had setbacks and he had great successes. Through it all, he maintained his sense of humor.

In this collection of essays, John shares some of his hard-won lessons: lessons about everyday life in a village; about values, social cohesion, and the importance of family; about land, resources, and farming; about gender relations; about outsiders and insiders, status, and power relations; about deference, respect, and spirituality; about ethnicity and ethnic conflict; and about politics—local, national, and global.

Most important, however, John learned about the significance of context and local wisdom when evaluating ideas imported by idealistic and often naïve outsiders. He learned—from his own failures and those of others—that simple models of development hatched in university research centers seldom yield their intended results on the ground. John is possessed of the “gift of doubt” and has used this gift throughout his career to question the fundamental assumptions of development. Yet, he has never been driven by doubt or cynicism to reject development efforts. Rather, he has embraced with humility and respect all those who toil in hope for a better world.

Perhaps his core insight—one that informs each chapter—is captured in his question: *What is the antonym of poverty?* The answer for John is not wealth; it is justice. Seeing justice as the goal of all development work is a radical mind-set in a field dominated by economists for whom wealth and capital accumulation can obscure the aims and resources of people who are left behind.

If justice is to be our guide, then the poor are not beneficiaries of outsiders' ideas or largesse; they are actors, co-strategists, and co-investors in defining the world they want to live in, the governments they will support, and the rights that they expect to have protected by their communities and leaders. This approach involves a radical shift in mind-set for the Northern-trained development professional. John's essays are an excellent resource for anyone who wants to understand better what many development professionals unfortunately only learn after decades of fieldwork. This collection is John's effort to share his gifts of doubt and humility with those considering taking a similar path.

Join him on the journey. You will be challenged in all good ways.

Raymond Offenheiser
President
Oxfam America
December 2016

PREFACE

I gave this set of 13 in-house seminars at Oxfam America during 2012-2014. I tried to have a paper ready to accompany each seminar, but at the time my “papers” ranged from well-edited documents to scribbled bullet points on the backs of envelopes.

I have now prepared a paper for each seminar. Each also includes the major points that emerged from the discussion period that followed the presentation of the material.

My heartfelt thanks go to Alessandra Gallo, who did the initial editing of the papers, and to Sarah Livingston, who did the preparatory work for the seminars. Many thanks also to Danielle Murphy, who did a second round of editing and formatting. Danielle also incorporated the main points from the question and answer session into each text. I bear the whole burden of guilt if any sins of omission or commission have crept into the material. Many thanks to Jane Huber, Chris Hufstader, and Sandra Stowe, all of Oxfam, for their detailed editorial suggestions and design work. Special thanks to Dachnel Kamars and Bu Mun who patiently and comprehensively introduced me to Minangkabau/Indonesian culture.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the critical support Ray Offenheiser has always provided to me, going back now more than two decades. That's critical in both meanings: essential as well as sharp-eyed, evaluative, and challenging.

WHAT THESE SEMINARS ARE AND WHAT THEY ARE NOT

I was extremely fortunate to be able to live in Asia for more than two decades. Indonesia, India, Thailand, and Vietnam were my homes and my reference points regarding issues of poverty and social injustice. These countries gave me a sense of the rhythms of daily village life; acquainted me with some of the survival strategies of people living in poverty; and suggested potential ways of working with elites and government, and the people, to attack poverty at a scale that makes a difference. I was immersed in local culture, especially in Indonesia. Serious language study helped me in three of my four postings in Asia. Language is truly the window to the soul and is critical for understanding deep seated social issues. Later, as senior vice president, programs, for Oxfam, my duties became global, and I was fortunate to be able to learn more about Latin America and Africa.

Living in villages first when I was a volunteer English teacher and later as a Ph.D. candidate researcher was invaluable, not the least because they helped me later to detect projects that might be on the wrong track. In the world of poverty alleviation, “nation-building,” and so-called “development”, a lot of projects get formulated without much reference to past efforts, good or bad. So many development professionals never seem to learn from experience as they bounce from project to project, rarely ever seeing how what they left behind actually operates. Given the huge scale of aid grants and loans for developing countries, it is amazing how little accountability there is in terms of integrity of approach and end quality. Many projects, I believe, are operating with severe misconceptions about social theory and poverty. I don’t have all the answers, but I think these seminars provide some clarity about which approaches work and why.

Since development activities started in the 1950s as the colonial powers began to withdraw from direct rule, we actually have learned a lot about what works and what does not. Sometimes this learning comes through research and evaluations, and sometimes through more anecdotal stories. Yet, even with so much money and so much rich experience to potentially draw on, there is still no comprehensive set of development standards that we could call *best practice*, *good enough practice*, or even *acceptable practice*. One valiant attempt is Duncan Green’s book *From Poverty to Power*. It engages these issues directly, but there need to be many more attempts to seriously interrogate the processes of impoverishment and its stubborn perpetuation. Organizations—whether governmental, corporate, non-profit, religious, or people’s organizations and movements, often are operating with an incomplete set of skills for understanding how people living in poverty can survive in a resource-constrained world. Development institutions have surprisingly little knowledge about how their own organizations could better invest their resources to combat poverty. Sometimes the knowledge is there—often in the form of unread or unheeded evaluations. It is a pity that moving the money out the door tends to absorb so much of the attention in these institutions.

In any case, this seminar series is one modest step toward advancing what may be a more or less common set of programming principles for rural development. I start from the point of view that pro-poor, sustained, and empowering approaches to development are challenging and complicated. Equitable and just development really *is* rocket science. Given the differing types and origins of poverty, we must pay particular attention to local variation. We are not all the same. But even though the cultural context of poverty and its permutations differ widely from place to place, I think that there are some lessons that may be universally applicable.

But be fair warned: In no way does this series of lessons claim to be comprehensive. It does touch on a few archetypal issues, but I make no claims that these seminars cover all issues or all potential approaches. Across the world there is a great variety of conditions, drivers, blockers, facilitators, and

hindrances to development. Nevertheless, I do feel confident that this series of seminars produced some good examples of situations that we are likely to encounter frequently in the field.

One additional reason spurred me to give this series of talks. It gradually dawned on me that many of the younger staff at Oxfam have never had the chance to live in a village, or to do research in one. One of the great successes of development efforts over the past 50 years has been the increasingly sophisticated education and training of development professionals who come from poor countries.

This is a happy development, but it has limited the opportunities for young Northerners to work in the trenches and to develop for themselves deeper conclusions about how those societies are structured and what kind of assistance they may need. That epiphany provided me with further incentive to record some of my experiences from working in development issues for nearly 40 years. Again, my experiences should not be regarded as dogma or truth; they are far from it. But I hope they will stimulate some serious questions, and if they succeed in helping us ask better questions, then this series will have been a success.

I almost called this book 'Plant Bamboo, Save the World: The Trials and Trails of a Development Aid Worker.' But I was worried that it might sound too much like some flaky memoir rather than a serious attempt to bring together not only my own but many people's learning through the decades. The "Plant Bamboo" part came from working with P.R. Mishra, a retired forester from the State of Haryana, in India. Upon leaving government service he moved to Ranchi, in the impoverished southern part of Bihar. The man was amazing. He was forever discovering new intercropping possibilities and innovative ways of sharing costs and revenue. I won't go into the details, but his agricultural results were transformative, and bamboo was an essential physical component. His New Year's greeting card always bore the exhortation, "Plant Bamboo; Save the World!" "Bamboo" was also a metaphor for returning to basics, building on what farmers already did well, and expanding this knowledge to large numbers of people.

Mishra was no day dreamer. He did not believe that rural people know everything. But he did affirm, as do I, that they know a lot, and that "development" needs to start with their objectives, asset base, knowledge, social institutions, and system of rights and responsibilities. Building on that platform, the development worker can help rural people reach higher and higher plateaus. Oh, there's one other thing. P.R. Mishra always said to me whenever we met, "Have you brought your brain today?"

Positive, prolonged, equitable, affordable, and transformative change is very difficult to achieve, but not impossible. So bring your brains when you read these seminars. You must be part of the solution!

HOW TO USE THESE SEMINARS

These seminars and the attached papers are not meant to be academic articles. They are not footnoted; they do not necessarily revolve around interrogating central social hypotheses; and, while attempting to inductively arrive at some broader concepts, the opinions that emerge here are very definitely derived from my own personal experience and from the experience of the audience. Your experiences may be to a greater or lesser degree different, but it is my hope that some of the conclusions you draw from your own work will overlap with those I drew from mine. Gradually, we may come to a greater understanding of what might be called generalizable principles in development.

Each of these seminars has a set of additional questions at the end. I had to be very selective in choosing what to ask. But I did want to highlight at least a couple of themes from each seminar that deserve to be pursued in more detail. It is my hope that the questions will stimulate more reflection on the main themes addressed by this series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Sterling Ambler was born in Denver, Colorado, where he lived until he was 18. He received his B.A. in psychology from Stanford University in 1975. For the next two years he taught English in Indonesia, first in West Sumatra, then in Bali, under the aegis of Volunteers in Asia. In 1977-1978, he and his wife traveled on a shoestring through Asia, observing poverty up close and personal by foot, bus, and third-class train.

John received his M.A. from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver in 1981, concentrating on development economics and issues of technology and social change.

He earned a Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1989 in Development Sociology, with additional concentrations in tropical agriculture and Southeast Asian Studies. His dissertation research, conducted in West Sumatra from 1984-1986 and funded by the Ford Foundation, compared the irrigation water management practices of the state to those of local farmers, and the conflict between technology and law in the formal sector versus customary law and the technology used by the farmers. Later, he joined the Ford Foundation in Indonesia, managing the water management portfolio.

He authored a book on irrigation in Indonesia, in Indonesian, published by LP3ES in 1991.

From 1990-1995 he was program officer and then deputy representative for the Ford Foundation, responsible for overseeing all the foundation's rural development work in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

From 1995-1997 he was the Ford Foundation's representative for Vietnam and Thailand. He opened the foundation's first Hanoi office.

He was regional director for Asia for CARE, based in Bangkok, from 2000-2004. His bailiwick stretched from Afghanistan and Tajikistan to the Philippines, and from North Korea to Sri Lanka. It also involved coordinating activities with CARE Australia in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and with CARE Canada in Indonesia and East Timor.

In 2004 he joined Oxfam America as senior vice president, programs, overseeing multiple development programs worldwide and the humanitarian response department. He was a member of Oxfam International's Global Team, and he led OI's Program Development Group from 2011-2013.

He is the author of more than 20 articles, on water management, poverty, and social development.

He retired in 2013 and lives in Colorado.

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Children at school in Senegal. *Rebecca Blackwell / Oxfam America*

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What I learned that first year in the village

PREFACE

This development lecture series is a chance for me to consolidate some of my thinking and experiences over the last nearly four decades, and through that process stimulate some dialogue about our development approaches: what works, what could work, what definitely will not work. My experience living in developing countries is limited to Asia. But I did end up living in Asia for 22 years, in Indonesia, India, Thailand, and Vietnam. Four of those years were in villages. I do have some perspectives that I want to share with you today about village mentality and lessons from the village. When I was with CARE I had to deal directly with the Taliban in Afghanistan regarding girls' education, with the LTTE in Sri Lanka regarding humanitarian assistance, and indirectly with the Maoists in Nepal. I'm not claiming super-ordinary analytical powers or experiences. I am basically an ordinary guy who has been inserted into some extraordinary circumstances, and come out alive and better for it. Now, to consolidate my own thinking and as a way to thank so many people for their help along the way, it is time to systematize some of my thinking and generate material for debate.

BACKGROUND

First, I want to talk about how I ended up in a fishing village in West Sumatra in Indonesia in 1975. I was an undergraduate at Stanford in the early 1970s and hit the tail of the protests over the Vietnam War. I got interested in the Vietnam War, but somehow managed to still go to classes. But I was pretty upset with US policy in Asia, and I was looking for a way to learn more about what was going on in Asia. A program at Stanford called Volunteers in Asia came to my attention. The program would enable me to go to Asia, learn about it, and not have to shoot anybody! I decided I wanted to go to Indonesia, so I took Indonesian classes along with my other courses during my junior and senior years. One of the great things about a university like Stanford is that it will arrange a class like Indonesian even if there is only one student. So when I arrived in Indonesia I was already reasonably fluent in Indonesian, which was unusual for new volunteers.

THE MINANGKABAU

I went to West Sumatra, which is the home of the Minangkabau people. The Minangkabau are devout Sunni Muslims, of the Hanafi branch, but they are also matrilineal. Now, you may think that's not possible—well, it is. I had an anthropology professor at Cornell who once who said, "Give me any combination of characteristics, no matter how seemingly contradictory they may seem, and I'll

find some group in the world who exhibits that combination.” So, it actually is possible to be matrilineal—the hereditary titles for the males, the hereditary houses and granaries, and the irrigated rice fields all pass through the female line. They are what is called *arato pusako tinggi* (noble hereditary wealth).

Common village property includes mosques and surau, places of religious instruction.

The man is called the *urang samando*, which literally means “borrowed man.” That shows you where the allegiances lie; he is bound to his mother’s rice fields, not with his wife’s rice fields. But there’s been a tension, a back-and-forth, between the matrilineal side of Minangkabau culture and the Muslim side of Minangkabau culture for at least 200 years.

Minangkabau tend to be highly educated. Many of the early poets using the Indonesian language came from that Central Sumatran belt. Many of the early educators—and ministers of education, in fact—also came from that group. There’s a relatively high status for women. But it’s highly rule-bound; social situations are very orchestrated. Clifford Geertz called West Sumatra part of Inner Indonesia. There’s Outer Indonesia, which relies more on slash-and-burn for food crops, and plantation or forest management for tree crops, and Inner Indonesia, which relies on irrigated rice production primarily. I ended up in a house on the beach next to a fishing village, outside of Padang, the capital.

I was tasked with teaching courses at Andalas University. These courses were being taken primarily by professors who wanted to improve their English so they could get World Bank scholarships for advanced degrees in Western universities. So, that was interesting; I’ll come back to that in a minute.

MY LIVING SITUATION

My room was six feet, six inches long (I’m 6’4”). There was no room for a chair in the room; I had to sit on the side of my bed and lean over a table made out of coconut logs to do my lesson plans and my writing. There was no electricity; I used a kerosene lamp (which is plenty hot, when you’re right next to it in the equatorial tropics). The sheet metal tin roof was good, because it kept the rain out. But, man, when the rains opened up—and it rains over four meters a year there in Padang—it’s like you’re inside a cement mixer. It’s just a constant din. There were a lot of mosquitoes, naturally. Little fireflies and bugs used to come in and circle around the kerosene lamp, which was a useful distraction from the rats.

I coexisted with the rats pretty well, for a long time. Then, one day I was sleeping, and I felt this drip, drip, drip. “Oh, God, a rat pissed on me. This is the end.” So, I declared war, got a trap, put it up in the plaited bamboo ceiling, placed some rice in it, caught one rat, took it out back to drown it, and then set up the trap again.

The other rats wouldn't go near it, because of the fear scent from that first rat. Now, this is one of the things about living overseas that's great—it really does reward creativity. I had a hard plastic purple soap dish, and inside, a bar of Lux soap (which was popular at the time). I noticed that the rats had been nibbling at it, trying to get through the hard plastic to get to the soap. So I cut off a chunk of soap as bait. I caught four more that night, and I never had any trouble with rats again. So, let that be a lesson for you: If you ever have any trouble with rats, or maybe partners in your household who act like rats, Lux soap is your ticket.

I used to have to walk from the main road out to the beach to get home. At night the briny water would rise in a back slough and partially cover the roadside. I'd roll up my pants to my knees, and as I walked through the water at night there were these bio-luminescent bugs that would light up as I disturbed the water. So, I would be slogging my way through the water and looking back there was this phosphorescent trail of bugs on the surface. It was pretty cool.

I was living on \$2 a day—I had \$62.50 a month from Volunteers in Asia. \$37.50 went for room and board, and \$25 a month for everything else (postage, Lux soap, in-city transportation). I didn't actually have to live like that. I could've probably gotten a nice room in a professor's house, probably in exchange for teaching his children English. But I didn't want go that route. I felt that if I was going to go to a poor country to try to understand it and the logic of poverty, I had to experience some of it myself. And I was probably trying to atone for having been living in comfortable California when the US was bombing the hell out of Vietnam. So, I chose this living situation.

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT ECONOMICS

Well, first, I learned how people survive on \$1 a day. I learned that they *rarely* survive on \$1 a day! That was the poverty line, and the fishermen on my beach house were poor by any standard, but they didn't survive on \$1 a day. There are so many non-monetized goods and services—family gift exchanges, home production, and gathering of things that never enter the market. Fishermen are, of course, collecting fish, but only part of that goes to the market. You don't see in the monetized economy anything that doesn't go through the market. Between the collective labor agreements and sharing arrangements, people actually were making more than \$1 a day. So, the poverty line established as \$1 a day was kind of a fiction. Good anthropologists and good economists will go deep into household budgets and try to monetize these kinds of labor exchanges, these collective agreements, these transfers of wealth from different groups. They'll try to monetize that, but it's really hard work to get any kind of accurate information.

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT AGRICULTURE

Well, first of all I grew up in Denver. I'm not from a farming community. Agriculture was all pretty new to me. And even if you grew up in Iowa, the agriculture in Indonesia would have been pretty new to you, too, because the crops were all different.

I shared a house with a childless couple. The husband made his money selling copra, the dried coconut kernel. That requires husking the coconuts, cutting open the hard shell that's on the outside, throwing out the water—by the way, you can't drink coconut water once it's old; you can only drink it when it's really young—and taking out that thick layer of copra and grinding it down. That's what's used to make santan, which is a high-cholesterol ingredient in Minangkabau cooking.

One of the things that became immediately apparent to me from the very earliest days was that people had to have diversified sources of income, even if it was all land-based. So, there was copra, there were chickens, there were fish, there were the nipa palms behind the house, and pandanus plants that you could cut into strips and then weave into mats. The idea of a diversified source of livelihood became pretty apparent to me early on. It wasn't until later that I actually studied anything formally about agriculture. When I was at Cornell one of my minors was tropical agriculture, so, I studied tropical soil science and tropical crop production, but that all came later.

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT SOCIAL ORDER

One of the things I learned is that there is this dense network of mutual self-reliance and functioning safety nets that operates in West Sumatra. It operates more strongly there than even in some places in Indonesia. But the price you pay for that kind of a safety net system is a loss of privacy. Everybody knows everything about everything you did at any hour of the day. Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world, and even 40 years ago it was already densely populated. It's even more densely populated now—everybody's literally on top of everybody else—and gossip is one of the major forms of communication and social control. There are so many ways of talking about gossip—I can think of at least five words for gossip right now: *desas desus*, *kabar pagar*, *kabar angin*, *isyu*, *omong kosong*—that you know it must be an integral part of the culture. Language is a really interesting barometer of what's important.

In matrilineal cultures, the young unmarried male is the lowest on the totem pole.

That would describe me. And yet, I was teaching professors at the university, so I was a *maha-guru*. I was an exalted teacher at that level, but I was still a nobody in Minangkabau social structure. I didn't have a car; I didn't even have a

motorcycle. I was obviously young and impecunious. I would walk along the street and people would yell at me, “Hey *Balando!*” *Balando* is Minangkabau for *belanda*, which means “Dutchman.” (They don’t say that anymore; they’ve gotten that much further away from the colonial period now.) All kinds of ridicule would be heaped on me; it was not exactly fun. *Cemooh*, or ridicule, can reach the level of a fine art in West Sumatra. But nine years later I came back to West Sumatra to do my dissertation field work. By that time, I was married. I had two daughters (daughters are good in a matrilineal society). I had a car. I was an equal to the professors (actually, two of them I had taught nine years earlier). Suddenly, life was good. I was treated much better, much differently than I had been treated before. And that kind of got me thinking, “Hey, wait a minute. I’m still the same guy. Why am I suddenly being treated better?” But that’s the way we are: We pay attention to status issues and money issues in the way we treat people.

A young male in West Sumatra, a Minangkabau male, would be almost driven out of the village to go seek fame, fortune, and education, before he’d be allowed to come back and get married. There’s a little bit of exploitation going on there, too, to send these guys off to the oil fields in Pekanbaru or Palembang, or the markets in Jakarta. Then, when they’ve accumulated enough money, they can come back and get married and be respectable members of village society.

WHAT I DIDN’T LEARN ABOUT SOCIAL ORDER

There were a lot of things that I didn’t learn that first year about Minangkabau culture that I did learn later, during my dissertation research time in the village. Doing field work overseas might be the topic of another discussion. For now, the takeaway is: It takes time to truly understand a place.

POLITENESS AND SOCIAL NORMS

One of the things that jumped out at me, almost from day one, is that politeness really does matter. Social norms are really important, more important than they are in the United States. If someone doesn’t follow the proper social forms, people say *tidak tahu adat*, which means “he doesn’t know the customs,” or the stronger *kurang ajar*, which means “he is insufficiently educated.” It was interesting that nobody was considered rude by nature; if you were rude, it was because you didn’t know better or because you had not been taught well. There is a lot of pressure for adults to control the children.

Enter technology, and new stresses on old customs appear. If you’re riding a motorcycle, your gas is on the right hand. And in Islamic culture—as in many cultures—the right hand is what you use to give and receive, and to wave to

people. You never wave with your left hand; you only wave with your right hand. But what do you do if you're riding your motorcycle and you see your friends and you want to wave to them? Do you take your hand off the gas? No, you keep your hand on the gas, but you take your left hand and move it over to the right side and wave as if it's your right hand. The point is that there are usually ways to accommodate old customs and new technology.

As an outsider, you have to pay attention to try to do everything you can to make people forget that you're different. You'll always be strange, but you want to at least get to the point where people do not run away in horror at the sight of you!

HAPPINESS DOES NOT DEPEND ENTIRELY ON MONEY

One of the things that struck me about West Sumatra is that there really are such things as smiling cultures. From Mali to Bali, there are some cultures where people just simply smile a lot more. That's really interesting, because people would sometimes smile even when they hear bad news. "So-and-so's son died." "So-and-so's mother is very ill." And they would smile slightly. To me, it seemed like inappropriate affect. But it was part of the culture, and you learned to smile politely when you heard things like that. You're obviously not happy, but it's an acknowledgment that life is what it is. Bad and sorrowful things do happen. You can't control everything, and you might as well go with the flow when you can't go against the current.

In West Sumatra, there was a lot of pressure to share wealth, and a lot of pressure not to accumulate too much wealth yourself. There was a big scandal when the provincial head of a certain government agency built a big new house in Padang. He was reported to have said, "The Swiss project funded this wing, and the German project funded that wing, and the USAID project funded the elevator." This was seen as going beyond the pale. People in West Sumatra get lots of good strokes for spreading the wealth around, and lots of frowns if they accumulate too much for themselves. Where a culture of moderation prevails; it is not good to be too ostentatious.

However, this ethic of sharing has been under assault. Advertising certainly promotes individualism and personal consumption. Now, every kid and his brother wants a motorcycle, and these motorcycles are pretty expensive for subsistence farmers. So, to accommodate the restless youth, the elders mortgage rice fields or pawn jewelry. This is guaranteed to cause dissent.

After being intimately engaged with Indonesia over a 15-year period and having lived in villages for some of those years, I thought I knew something about village life. But when I moved to India, it just blew me away. India was so different. Levels of exploitation and levels of visible poverty were tolerated in India that

would never have been tolerated in Indonesia. So, remember, there are real cultural differences in terms of rules about sharing wealth, and you should be aware of that.

As I have mentioned, I placed a lot of emphasis on language proficiency, and that was really important because when people don't speak the language well, they don't get good answers to their questions, do they? In the late 1990s I led several delegations of Vietnamese to the United States (this was in later years when I was with the Ford Foundation). I might be asked a question like, "Well, what about race relations in the United States?" In that case, I was likely to give an answer in pretty vague terms. But I might be asked, "Can you tell me about the movement in the 1930s from the South to the Industrial Belt in the North like Chicago and Detroit and how that impacted the receiving and sending communities?" Then, I would have realized it was a question of an entirely different sophistication and I would have to say, "I don't know." But if I did know, I was going to try to answer with a lot more nuance. What I found was, when I was later doing research in irrigation, that if I learned the local technical terms—some of which were known only in that valley—it opened up whole other worlds of information. People thought, "Oh, this guy knows about *alahan*, *paraku* and *mangesong*. We can talk about these things as serious people." That first year in the fishing village I used to listen every night to Radio Malaysia, which was beamed across from Kuala Lumpur. I also used to read the national newspaper every day. It was 12 pages at the time; it's about 200 now. I wrote down every word I didn't know. I kept them in little notebooks, until I didn't have to write down many words any more.

Learning language is only part of adapting. You have to learn the other parts about living in a society, like eating all kinds of interesting food—curried goat brains, dried buffalo lung, spicy rice field eels, and petai, jengkol, and durian, which are odiferous fruits. People really appreciate your efforts. I tell you, the thing that I did that first year that got the most praise was fasting during Ramadan. You get up at three in the morning and have a huge meal of rice and side dishes, then you fast until the sun goes down (which in equatorial West Sumatra is exactly at 6:05 pm. No food or drink from sun-up to sun-down. I missed a couple of days. But what really made a big impression was that during the fasting month I went to North Sumatra. In North Sumatra around Lake Toba the people are not Muslim; they're either Catholic or Protestant. Hence, they don't fast during Ramadan. I kept up the fast even in this Christian area, so I only ate once a day, after the sun went down. People back in Padang thought that was great: "This guy's crazy, but he's trying hard."

STUPID THINGS I DID

That first year in the village, I sometimes retreated into language study as an escape, because I didn't have much in common with the people in the fishing village. It was, frankly, tiresome to discuss the same things with them every day. This labeled me as something of a loner. I should have come up with some research project with them. I was also painfully aware that I did not speak Minangkabau well. I did some crazy things out of naivete. I had no experience with chilies, and food in West Sumatra is really hot. So, one day I'm helping the woman of the house cut up some chilies, and I rub my eyes just a little. Oh, man, my eyes were on fire! I ran out of the house and dove into the ocean with my eyes open to try to flush them out. That, too, was not a particularly smart thing, but it's understandable. When I was at Cornell, I used to see foreign students who had no experience with snow trying to negotiate the ice in flimsy tennis shoes. I knew exactly how they felt.

SMART THINGS I DID

I kept a diary. I wrote a letter to my sweetheart every day. We eventually got married, possibly because she couldn't take any more letters from me! "I can't take this anymore, John, let's just get married." Those letters form an important personal record. I also kept up a diary after we were married.

Year two in Indonesia was spent teaching at the Teacher Training College in Bali. Bali reminds me of another issue about living in a village. In Bali, we lived in an urban village (*banjar*) with a family.

It was nice to have a family around, but after almost 12 months we were so ready to leave. The Balinese are very superstitious. There's no such thing as a coincidental illness, or accidental accident. Everything is caused by the evil eye, black magic, or some other malevolent action from one's enemies. Everything has a supernatural underlayment, and it all seemed to be based on revenge, power mongering, and ill will. But don't worry, the tourists see Bali the beautiful, not Bali the vengeful. So, don't change your travel plans.

Before getting married I would throw myself into local situations. I spent a lot of time with truck drivers and medicine sellers. I used to love to listen to the medicine sellers in the market, because I was still learning Indonesian and the medicine sellers would speak in Indonesian and not Minangkabau, even if they were from West Sumatra. If you spoke in the national language, it made the medicine seem more exotic, or more high-class. If you tried to hawk your wares in Minangkabau, you were seen as just some quack mixing up some concoction in the village and calling it medicine. Hitchhiking by truck I heard all kinds of stories, including those about *tiger-men*.

The *man-ghosts* called *tiger men* are actually tigers that can assume the form of men. If you pick up a hitchhiker he could turn into a tiger and eat you. The way that you tell that they're tigers and not real people is that they don't blink their eyes. So, beware of people who don't blink.



Tiger crossing sign; Sijunjung, West Sumatra, 1985

I tried my hand at husking coconuts—it's tough! It's just a stake in the ground and you jam the coconut down and pry it off. It takes some skill and some brawn.

I learned how to draw water from a well. You don't just throw a bucket in the water and pull it up; you've got to jerk it with your wrist to get the pail to tip to start taking on water, and then you can pull it up.

I helped the fishermen pull in the *payang*. The *payang* was a huge long net that they would put out in the water at 6 o'clock in the morning. Then they would pull it in by hand from the land, with about six people on each end, tugging backwards step by step by step in the soft sand. When they got to certain point the guy at the back would go up to the front, and continue the step by step by step ritual. This took about four hours. Then they would see if they netted anything. Sometimes they didn't, especially if there'd been a storm causing the fish to go into deeper, quieter waters. I once worked with the fishermen pulling in the *payang* for about two hours. It was really hard work. When the net was in—and over my protestations—they gave me the best fish in the catch. The poor are always the most generous!

I tried my hand at hoeing the rice paddy. You're up to your thighs in mud, and you're whacking at the mud with a hoe. People complained about their eyes, because the hoe kicks up bits mud and flings it right into your eyes. I had glasses, so I was okay, but it was something that I never would have imagined if I had not tried hoeing myself.

I learned a little bit about dealing with bureaucracy in a third-world country. You take every paper you could possibly need, in multiple copies, but you don't show officials anything unless they ask for it specifically. If you show them papers, then they think they need to see it. And if it's from another agency, then they really get scared because they think, "Now I've got to contact another agency about

this issue. Is this all right?" Delay is inevitable. No, don't show them anything until you absolutely have to.

Second, don't pay bribes; it actually slows things down. But don't be afraid to use your contacts. A lot of times, Americans think, "Well, I can just do this on my own, using the system. Everybody's treated equally, right?" No, use your contacts, if you've got them.

SOME GENERAL LESSONS FOR DEVELOPMENT NGOS

It takes time and sufficient interaction to learn what really matters in a society. One of the questions is: Do we, as a development NGO, have the local partners who have that detailed knowledge, since we ourselves are too removed from the village level to know it directly? Are they sufficiently in touch, especially as we think about doing more national-level policy work and as we go beyond field experimentation? We talk about working more with government; how do we help government officials learn these same lessons from people's real experience with poverty, since most government officials are now not from villages themselves? They've grown up for several generations in cities. How do we help our own program staff who may be from the same background?

They may originally have been from a village, and they may know something about agriculture—at least more than I did growing up in Denver—but they may not be farmers and they may not have ever actually farmed themselves.

I think another lesson is: Everything is eventually revealed, but it's revealed slowly and on the basis of trust. So, if we want to get sensitive information like income levels, land ownership, or sources of income, we can't rely too much on sample surveys. We have to use sensitive techniques; and we've got to triangulate. This applies to government agencies, as well. Don't trust government figures.

Let me give you an example from my research. Take the extent of irrigated agriculture in the Lintau Valley, where I did my research. If you got the figures from the Department of Public Works, which handles irrigation, you would get a figure 75 percent larger than the figure from the Department of Agriculture. Why? Well, the Department of Irrigation gets its budget based on the area it claims to operate. The Irrigation Department inflated the figures, so they would get more money. But if you talked about crop yields, you couldn't trust the figures from the Ministry of Agriculture, because it gets its budget based on showing yield increases. The Department of Public Works would give you a much more reasonable figure for crop yields. Farmers will report really large amounts of land to the Agriculture Extension people so they can get more fertilizer, which is meted out according to area. And, predictably, they under report their holding

when dealing with the land tax office! So, you have to triangulate, and know what is driving the figures for each source.

Another lesson: Don't assume that all villages are the same. Villages can be different, and not just country to country. Wet-rice villages are different than dry-rice villages, and highland villages differ from lowland villages, which are different yet again from forest villages. In Southeast Asia—that's from Myanmar over to Vietnam, and from Thailand down to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste—women have a much stronger role in the household economy than they do in South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka—Sri Lanka's a little bit of an exception). In Southeast Asia, women control the purse strings for the household budget. If you target a man in Southeast Asia, there's a much higher likelihood that some of the project-generated income will go to the family. Compare that to India, Nepal, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, where you really have to target women specifically or they may not get any of the benefit at all.

Finally, social structures do matter. As people interested in promoting durable social institutions, we need to move innovation beyond the project phase and into a new way of doing things, we need people who can sustain action to move ideas. Without that kind of durable institutional support, things collapse. And yet, what do development agencies (World Bank, et al.) do repeatedly? They say, "Do you want this project?" "Yes." "Are you willing to own this project?" "Yes." "Good. Well, we're going to bring the project in and help you."

But one of the things I learned about "yes," in Indonesia anyway, is that "yes" often means "maybe." And "yes" often means "no way, baby." And "yes" can mean, "Okay, I'm going to be polite to you because I know you want to hear a 'yes,' and I really don't want to offend you right now. However, I have no intention of following through on what I just said." Learning the difference between "no" and "yes" is essential to learning the difference between success and failure in development. Paying attention to the social angles up front pays big dividends later.

So, there you have a random set of lessons from year number one in the village. As a naïve 22-year-old, I came in with bright eyes. I hated it at first, but then I grew to love it.

Q & A PERIOD

Q: "I'm wondering, John, do you think that there are opportunities now, and 10 years from now, for development practitioners who are from the North to have this sort of village experience? And I want to exclude Peace Corps, and academics or anthropology."

John: "Well in some ways, unfortunately, there are fewer opportunities, because the specific skill set that Westerners or Northerners have that were really

valuable 30 or 40 years ago are not so much in demand, except in some place like Africa where the local education system is still rather underdeveloped. Native English speakers are still in demand in many places. Japan, for example, a highly industrialized country, has a strong demand for native English speakers still. But you don't need foreign agronomists in large parts of Asia. You don't need engineers, you don't need electrical experts, you don't need sewer and sanitation people; you've got them already. Universities in Asia are cranking out large numbers of highly competent people, so if we think about Asia, the opportunities are less. But there are still some countries that are interesting to explore, like Myanmar. In fact, I was going to do my dissertation research in Myanmar and I had a foreign language/area studies fellowship for studying Burmese for two years at Cornell. But when the space for doing meaningful field work in Myanmar kept closing up, I went back to Indonesia. So, I had the luxury of studying Burmese because I had a fallback position, but Myanmar would be an interesting place to explore. But it is true: In some ways, the experience that I had is more difficult to replicate now."

Q: "You mentioned being a single male and how that put you on the bottom of the totem pole. I was wondering if you could share any lessons learned from how you managed that? A lot of us, especially younger or unmarried women travelling in these developing countries or working in developing countries, are in that position often. So, any insights or advice?"

John: "Get older and drive a car! I don't know; it's hard. When you're on foot, or taking public transportation, you're out there. You're exposed. It's more difficult for a young woman in a patrilineal culture than it is for a male in a matrilineal culture, so you would have much more trouble than I did. I'm a big guy; people didn't hassle me too much. In fact, one of the first phrases I learned in almost any language was 'two meters,' because that was people's guess at how tall I was. So, I would hear this '*hai met!*' (Vietnamese.) People were guessing at how tall I was, so I picked that up pretty quickly.

But I think it's always easier for a single person, culturally, if you can travel with somebody else—even if it's another single woman.

Q: As a young, single woman in Haiti, I'd be taking public transportation—this is when I was in Peace Corps—and I'd often get guys asking me if I was married, if I had a boyfriend, etc. I used to get in touch with the other Peace Corps volunteers (other young women), asking, 'How do you handle that?' And one of the things was using humor, or twisting things a little bit. One of the best answers would be, 'Oh, do you love me?' ('like' and 'love' were the same word), and the answer would be, 'Oh, yes, I love you like a brother because we're all God's children.' And then there was nothing they could say back to that. And I think in general, when I got to know the language a little better, and the culture, I found that, when you get to that certain level that you are able to do it, using humor helps so much to ease whatever kind of situation."

John: “Humor is really important. Now—before I get into the joke—a lot of single women I know would wear a ring to indicate to people that they are married. That can sometimes reduce the hassle. But I know what you mean about humor. One of the first things I learned how to say, right after I learned what ‘two meters’ was in the local language, I would learn to say back in whatever language it was, ‘Maybe because of poor nutrition I am only 195 centimeters tall.’ *That* really floors people. Because even if my Vietnamese is not that good, or my Hindi is not that good, I can savor the moment—the moment that people think my Vietnamese or my Indonesian is better than it really is.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- What part of one’s “foreignness” should one try to maintain, even as one tries to integrate as much as possible into a foreign culture?
- What are techniques for integrating with a foreign culture, and can one go too far in trying to integrate?
- What are more good techniques for keeping one’s spirits up when faced with ridicule from local people?



Romas Oeun, a radio reporter with Media One--a station that produces radio programs in indigenous languages to help teach people in Cambodia how to protect their fragile forests, agricultural lands, and rivers. *Savann Oeurn / Oxfam America*

2

The language of development, or why I am against community participation

PREFACE

Before I launch into the topic, I should first explain a few of my principles:

- I am against *community participation!*
- I am against *community contribution to development!*
- I am against *community engagement!*
- I am against *building community sense of ownership* in development projects!
- I am against *forming community organizations!*
- I am against *strengthening community organizations!*
- I am against *giving the poor voice!*
- I am against *empowering the poor.*
- I am against *fighting poverty!*
- I am against *demanding justice for the poor!*
- In fact, I am actually against *the poor!*

Shocked? Do we have a case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde here? You must be wondering, “Why is this guy working for Oxfam at all if he is against all these good and sacred things?” You may remember from my first seminar that I said, “Language is the window to the soul.” But I think we need to do some linguistic soul-searching in the development field. Language subtly conditions how we think, and conversely, how we think conditions what we say. So, we need to be careful about what we think and what we say.

LET’S DEFINE WHAT WE MEAN BY *DEVELOPMENT*

Let’s start with the question of what we actually think *development* is? This will enable us to examine whether we speak a language of empowerment or one of implicit subordination and dependency. We think our language is inclusive, but is it really? And, by the way, what does *being inclusive* really mean? In fact, by the end of this seminar, you may even think about such terms as *inclusiveness* in a different way.

When I’m thinking about *development*, I’m thinking about a concept that has several characteristics. I hope we are thinking about *pro-poor development* as a concept that includes at least the following: a state of progressively greater decision-making power for people now living in poverty; more meaningful

ownership; increased access; stronger rights; and an ability to exert ever more power in a wider array of venues. The opposite of poverty is not wealth, but justice! We can wordsmith the exact language, but that is the essence. *Decision-making. Ownership. Assets. Access. Rights. Voice. Power. Justice.* These are the concepts we want in any definition of development.

But are those concepts actually reflected in the language that donors, government officials, and NGOs use? If we look closely (or sometimes even not so closely!) we see that they tend to use a particular lexicon that is often both theoretically weak and practically unhelpful for supporting a pro-poor vision of development.

So, I am going to take on some of that unhelpful language here today. Let's look more closely at why I am against some supposedly very good concepts.

Community participation can actually be subtle code to mean that the community is participating in someone else's activity, not really its own. In essence we are saying, "We (government, donor, NGO) decide, we control the resources; you please be a good little community and participate!" *Community engagement* is similar in that it betrays who the main actor is and where the power really lies. The government or corporation is calling the shots and reaching out to, or engaging, the community, usually to gain community compliance or contribution, reduce community opposition, or reduce costs of social opposition. But the power still clearly rests outside the community.

Community contribution, a related concept, on the face of it seems like a good thing. But I think it is actually patronizing. It is as if the community is asked just to provide some incidental voluntary ad hoc addition to a project that the community itself does not really own. Just because you contribute a few dollars toward something does not mean that you own it. Contributing alone does not mean you are in control or involved in making decisions. "Please contribute" is not the language of empowerment or ownership. In fact, the voluntary and often loose nature of contributions actually inhibit rights from being established. That is a subject we will take up in more depth in another seminar. And shouldn't we be talking about real ownership, as in formal legal title or some written proof, not just some vague sense of ownership? You can't fool people into believing they own something if they really don't. Where's the deed to the assets we help poor communities create? Show me the paper!

What about *forming organizations*? Organizations are good, right? Yes, but the only entities that can legitimately form a social organization are the members of the organization itself. Outsiders can catalyze the formation of people's organizations. Outsiders can help provide guidance and training, but ultimately they should be providing a stimulus, not a replacement for endogenous energy. Organizations directly formed by NGOs or the government tend to be tainted by instrumentalism. For example, in Suharto's Indonesia, the government mandated that each village have up to 30 organizations, everything from farmers'

associations, to boy scouts, to water committees, to you name it. Communist governments are the same. They have the same incorrigible desire to form fronts and unions and committees and units and cells. Some of these organizations can and do take root, but it is a struggle when the energy has to come and be maintained from outside. Following on that, do we actually have the power to strengthen organizations, or can we only teach them to use tools that they can use to become stronger themselves?

How about that arch-word, *poverty*? How about *fighting poverty*? How could you be against a thing like that? Is poverty a thing that we fight? If we say we are “fighting poverty,” isn’t it something like fighting the flu, where we are only giving palliative care for the symptoms? If we are not self-aware, the term *fighting poverty* also subtly encourages us to think of poverty only in material terms, or, more precisely, in terms of a lack of material possessions. Yet, we know poverty is in large part a function of complicated systems of injustice. The material deprivation associated with poverty is just the outcome of a process of injustice that runs much deeper.

Empower(ment). This is a tricky one. If we think about the word in a literal sense, do we have power that we are transferring to people living in poverty? Are we somehow transferring power to them? I think not. Yes, we want people living in poverty to have more power, but it is hubris to think that we can give them power. Ultimately, it is the people themselves who must take more power and assume their rightful place among those who have historically and traditionally been more powerful. We can play a role in that process—if we can’t, we should roll up our yoga mats and go home!—but we actually do not have the power to transfer anything to anybody.

Then, we have some of my favorite whipping boys: *target group*, *beneficiaries*, and *the poor*. All three terms are all subtly demeaning and disempowering. This type of language surrounds us, and not just from government; it often comes from NGOs, as well. Think for a second about the term *beneficiaries*. If we look at it literally, someone outside the community is doing something that benefits the community. It implies that the community is passive, just sitting back and receiving something from someone else, like being a beneficiary in your uncle’s will. This does not paint a picture of people being active agents in their own change processes.

WHAT AM I FOR?

So, if I’m against all those things, what am I for? What is the alternative? I am for the following:

I’m not for *participation*, but I am for *co-design* with the community; people are not just involved or just participating in development. With true co-design they are

joint decision-makers from the inception of the effort. The people are fully taking part in making decisions and in the design process from inception to conclusion.

I don't like *contribution*, I support community *co-investment*. People do not just provide ad hoc contributions, but rather they systematically are allowed, indeed, actually required to invest in the project. It does not matter if cumulatively their shares only total, say, 10 percent of the value of the project, or if their investment comes only in the form of labor and materials. When they are treated as investors, they are creating ownership shares; they are not just the passive recipients of government, donor, or NGO largesse. If people's investments are viewed as equivalent to buying shares in the project, and formally recorded as such, then they can be used to help create formal community rights and specific individual ownership rights and, very importantly, formal subsequent maintenance responsibilities. This is a topic I will explore in more depth in another seminar. But just take an example from the water sector. If a farmer's specific investments in building an irrigation system are required and recorded, she or he is in a much stronger position to say, "I put in x days labor and y dollars into building this system! Where's my water?!" And the water users' association is in a much stronger position to say, "Look, you got x amount of water. Where's your part in maintaining the system?!" Not requiring or not allowing the community to invest might at first seem like a good idea—after all they are poor, right? But in the long run it undermines community management of the project because it does not give them a basis for determining ownership or maintenance responsibilities and to form formal shares. If people are denied the opportunity to formally invest, they are being denied the opportunity to create formal shares of the assets being created.

Sense of ownership, let's throw that one out. Let's talk about real ownership. For tangible assets, we should concentrate on giving community groups formal legal title to the assets that have been created through the project. A handshake or the admonition that "this is now your property" is usually not enough, especially after some time has elapsed. If the community really thinks that it is the government or an NGO that owns the assets, you know exactly where they will turn when something breaks and needs fixing. We've seen time and time again that they will wait for someone else to fix it even if they could do it themselves. For non-tangible assets, we should talk about improving *access* to services and decision-making for people suffering from injustice. And we should create real functional ownership through co-investment.

Providing community organizations with *resources* is preferable to *strengthening organizations*. Strengthening organizations sounds like injecting them with steroids or growth hormones. But it should be providing them with weight training equipment and teaching them how to use it. Community organizations must ultimately strengthen themselves, through hard work and trial and error. To take the sports analogy a bit further, a weight training coach cannot make an athlete stronger, only teach the athlete how to use weights to get stronger. Similarly, we

cannot effectively demand justice for people living in poverty. People must demand it themselves. When we are at our best, we can use our stature, our ability to bring unlikely actors together to work on a common problem, and our deal-brokering skills to help put them in a position to more effectively demand justice, to demand their rights. We may lend our voice to the chorus, but without people's own voices driving the effort, our voice will be weak, unconvincing, and ultimately not fully legitimate. We can, however, help link people living in poverty with other groups speaking out.

In a similar sense, we're helping people to gain power. We're being a catalyst, we're being a guide, and we're being a resource mobilizer. We're helping them get access to resources. But the locus is really with the people themselves, in helping people gain power. Helping them create assets, gain access to markets and decision-making forums, and gain voice and representation is what we aim to accomplish, but we have to remember that we assist, not actually empower. When we go back to the Latin roots of the word advocacy, when we think about advocacy as amplifying the voice of the poor, building off of their efforts, helping them to speak louder and stronger, I think then we're in a good position to really help.

PERSISTENCE OF THE LANGUAGE OF DOMINATION

Why has this not-so-subtle language of domination persisted? There is an innocent reason and a not-so-innocent reason:

The innocent reason: We have grown up with this language and have not questioned it. We haven't really analyzed it. It's become so common in our vocabulary that we haven't taken the time to step back and say, "What do I really mean when I say 'community participation' or 'community engagement'?"

The not-so-innocent reason: It serves to keep elites in control and in the driver's seat. If you're just asking a community to participate, not allowing them to really invest or build shares or assets, you're still controlling the budget. You can still control the transparency of that budget—you're in the driver's seat still and you're not giving up any power. Change would require giving up power, including giving up the power to keep budgets opaque. Real sharing of decision-making, ownership, investment, etc., requires that people be brought into the boiler room, into the design and budget process. A lot of agencies in the development industry actually do not want that.

SUPPLY-SIDE LANGUAGE AND DEMAND-SIDE LANGUAGE

If we step further back a moment, we can see that the language I have objected to today is essentially the language of *supply-side development*. Elites have a particular supply of development assistance that they control. And that supply of development assistance comes in very particular and relatively standardized forms. “We have irrigation systems for you, we have health programs for you, we have schools for you. And this is the way it will look.” This is not very participatory in terms of co-designing them. (Cf., Henry Ford’s statement: “The public can have cars in any color they want, as long as it’s black!”) Well, governments, NGOs, and donors are still kind of the same way. A lot of the form of development is preconditioned, it’s pre-set. And it’s delivered *to* the communities. And communities are asked to participate in it, contribute to it if they can. But they’re not really involved in the decision-making and not really deeply involved in the form of that development assistance. They’re not building assets and shares in it.

So, that’s kind of a supply-side thing. The government wants communities to participate, but they don’t necessarily require it and they don’t do it from the vantage point of building assets. Sometimes these assets are created not for the communities themselves at all. They’re created as government property, and there’s no intention that the communities would ever own these assets—like certain schools or health clinics. These are government clinics, government schools. It actually serves the agency that builds them well to have them stay government property, because then they collect budget year by year based on the number of clinics that they have and the number of schools that they operate. It keeps their own agency budget large.

NGOs, for their part, feel powerful when they can *strengthen* organizations, *empower people*, *fight poverty*, and *demand justice*. The more appropriate role of catalyst, amplifier, and trainer is much less sexy, and, sadly, it is also much less convincing to the funders of NGOs! A funder might ask, “Do we really need NGOs if all they do is assist in development processes? We want them to *deliver* development.” The donors are implicitly saying, “You have to do supply-side development, not demand-side development.”

On the other hand, the language I have been proposing today is much more on the demand side of development. People are agents of their own change, they are investors and decision makers, they are owners of assets created, and increasingly they raise their voices themselves. Development processes proceed much more on the basis of people’s expressed needs and wishes and less on the basis of presumed needs. People are becoming more active citizens and forging new relationships between themselves and their governments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NGOS

We need to review our communications, our program strategy papers, and our strategic plans. Is the language subtly encouraging dependency or subordination instead of empowerment, independence, and real power? I actually think we are pretty good here, but it is worth taking a closer look.

We need to review the design of some of our projects and programs. What language really lies behind them? Are concepts of real ownership and asset building and control of one's destiny underpinning the program, or is the subtle language of dependency still at work?

What is the language our own government is using? Can we press the government on this point? And if we look at the way the government is characterizing its own development assistance, what does that imply about independence, self-sufficiency, and empowerment?

We need to be more aggressive about bringing it to the attention of our partners and allies and political bedfellows when they use this kind of supply-side, subordinating language, even if unintentionally. National government officials are particularly prone to using this type of language, but NGOs can be guilty of the language of non-empowerment, as well.

A large part of Oxfam America's field operations consists of making grants to partners. Fortunately, we talk about *partners*, not *grantees*, like many foundations do, but it can still be a struggle to stay appropriately humble when you control the purse-strings.

We need to pay more attention to formal processes and formal title to new assets in our community-based development work, and making sure that the ownership of the assets we create actually lies with the community. A smile and pat on the back is not enough to get the long-run development and community-generated maintenance we want. We need to formalize the rights. I'll give the example from northern Ethiopia, the Adiha irrigation system.

We built this system with partners in 1996. It's a pretty big system, about 200 hectares, and it still functions today. It produces a bumper crop of high value oranges in a region where citrus is scarce. But the last time I visited the system I noticed that in the intake for the irrigation system there are a couple of big holes in the bottom of the canal. Mr. Tekleweini, who's the head of REST, the NGO that we worked with to build that system was with me. I asked, "Why don't the farmers repair that? This could lead to some serious damage if they let it go much longer." At the meeting with the farmers, Tekleweini asked them, "Why don't you repair that hole in the canal?" And they said, "We were waiting for you to repair it." And Tekleweini said, "Well, why were you waiting for me to repair it? It's your system." And they looked at the ground and said, "We thought it was your system."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: irrigation headworks; irrigation system signage; and Oxfam and NGO leaders, Adi Ha irrigation system, Tigray, Eithiopia. *John Ambler*

So, even for something that’s functioning pretty well, when it comes to the issue of maintenance, then some of these misconceptions or stresses start to appear.

We will take up these issues from the angle of customary and statutory law in more depth in the next seminar.

We need to make sure that our fundraisers are comfortable using the demand-driven lexicon, and gently educate our donors in why we use it and not the supply-driven language. Can we find better terms for some words? For some terms that I wrestle with, I don’t even know what the alternatives to them would be. It would help a lot if our fundraisers and program officers could agree on alternatives to phrases like:

- *Primary agent of change*, referring to people. That’s great, I agree with that. But is there another word for saying “primary agents of change?” It doesn’t exactly roll off your tongue when you’re trying to raise money. “You know, we’re trying to help the ‘primary agents of change!’ Sorry, I gotta go to a meeting...”
- *Being inclusive*. Inclusive is one of these funny things. We sort of know what it means, but it’s also kind of vague and ambiguous. Similarly, *inclusive growth*. We know that we’re probably meaning growth that helps a lot of people, but what does it really mean?
- *Fighting poverty*. At the end of the day, how do we fight poverty in a way that’s linguistically correct as well as conceptually clear?

Q & A PERIOD

Q: “We are working to eliminate poverty, if that’s even possible. But it doesn’t seem like poverty’s getting better. Are we part of the problem?”

John: “Well, I think we are part of the problem when we think about aid as charity. And that’s a big issue. Because if you just think about giving foreign aid as providing something, rather than as developing capacity, developing assets, then you’re just giving something away. And when you give something away like that, there are two big problems. One is: What you’re giving away is often not very closely aligned to what people need, because they weren’t involved in the creation of the project or the conceptualization of what kind of assistance they were going to need. So, there’s the problem about what you’re giving away.

And then the second problem is how you’re giving it away. If you’re just putting it in place without dealing with the structures of creating assets and creating ownership, what’s going to happen to it? Well, go around any developing country and you’ll find that the landscape is littered with projects that don’t work or that have ceased to work because the ownership issue wasn’t really settled; the investment principles that I was talking about earlier were not really addressed, so now they’re littering the landscape as epitaphs to aid. But I don’t mean to say that aid itself is bad, because we can see where aid has really developed regions. I’ve seen some roads, for example, that were instrumental in opening up areas to commerce. The commerce and the taxes and the other things were more than enough to pay for the maintenance of that road. So, there are situations where development assistance has really been instrumental. I look at some of the irrigation systems and some of the dams. How long those will last is another matter, but you see that they’ve transformed certain regions for the better. And a lot of that was done with foreign aid. So, it’s not that all aid is bad, but you have to think about what kind of responsibilities it is creating. What kind of ownership is it fostering? And is it charity or not? So, I’m against charity, but I’m for good development assistance.”

Q: “The kind of things that you’re talking about and the interpretation you would like us to take on these issues, to me, is that you’re advocating more of a rights approach. At Oxfam, we refer to ourselves as a rights-based organization. So how would our work—how would Oxfam’s work—change? What are some of the fundamental changes we should expect if we were to truly employ a rights perspective in our work?”

A: “Well, the Oxfams all talk about being rights-based organizations. When you actually get down to looking at the project-to-program level, there’s a huge range in how rights-based our work actually is. And sometimes we go no further than our rights-based philosophy. But when you get down to the field level, we’re not always rights-based. Let’s take the irrigation work in Ethiopia. I like it a lot; I think it’s really adding value and really building livelihoods. But it’s not gone far enough

yet in terms of building ownership. And you really only know that you've built ownership when people start maintaining the assets that have been created. So, I think this relationship between building ownership and building maintenance of the assets that have been created is something that we still need to work on. When we think about changing government policy, are we thinking about changing it in a pro-poor way in general? Or are we thinking about changing it in a pro-poor way that has a rights element to it? I think we haven't always wrestled with that.

I see big variations among the different Oxfams in the field. Not that I've done a survey of every Oxfam's project, but you start to get a feel for which projects have a rights-based element to them. I think our gender-based work, from what I've seen, is very rights-based. The Oxfam America work, the Oxfam Great Britain work I saw in Honduras recently, and the work that Oxfam Great Britain is doing in Tanzania—it's very rights-based, in terms of trying to get women more power and to change policy and combat gender-based violence and discrimination. I don't think there's any question that they've made real rights-based progress there."

Q: "Great, John. This is great. I'm going to throw out another really 'easy' question. So, given the mushrooming population (and most all of it happening in the poorest countries in the world), declining resources, and given the detritus of most development efforts, where vast amounts of money are being squandered. Given what you've been saying about the importance of language, what you've presented today—what kind of approach, what kind of elements, go into an approach where every dollar counts, and where they have maximum impact, given the perspective of what's coming up over the next year?"

A: "Okay, well I'll answer the first part of that question second, and the second part of that question first. Any other questions?"

"No, seriously, it's a big problem, but the way I look at it is that we need to have several things going on in our minds when we develop these programs. We've got to think about scale, in a way that we haven't always thought about scale in the past. And there are several ways you get scale. You get it through private sector proliferation—some kind of market mechanism. You can get it through people-to-people adoption of something (people's movements, etc.), or you get it through changes in the way that government operates. And all three of those are valid and potential ways for getting more scale. Now, your Saving for Change program has been more the people-to-people type of movement, and that's shown really some amazing results in a short period of time, in a few countries.

"I think one of the things that Oxfam has to get over is a phobia about working with government. Sometimes we think, 'Well, we're a non-governmental organization. We don't work with government.' But, you see, in a lot of countries it's exactly the government that's got the most resources, the most penetration, the most scale, the most reach within the country, and the mandate to potentially

help its own people. So, I think we need to think more systematically in terms of how we as an NGO can work more effectively with national governments. And I think that's going to be part of our agenda as Oxfam more generally in the coming strategic plan, because we're talking much more about national-level advocacy and national-level campaigning and national-level programs. And that's going to force us to work more intensively with national governments, and I think that's a positive way for the future. But there's going to be a steep learning curve on it, too. So I think those are the types of areas where we would get more traction for dealing with the resource scarcity and population growth. We'll talk more about how to reach scale in other seminars."

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- What ways can we devise to change our language from a charity and patronizing approach to one of empowerment and rights?
- What is the relationship between our development language and rights and maintenance of development projects?
- How do we get governments to adopt more rights-based language?



Lourdes Huanca, president of an indigenous women's organization in Peru, talks with police officers during a march through the streets of Lima. *Percy Ramírez / Oxfam America*

3

The role and future of customary law

THE LAW AND OXFAM

Law is a set of codes governing social interaction. It is a normative framework. It identifies rights and responsibilities, and punishments for transgressions, both at individual and sometimes at group, community, and corporate levels.

I want to talk about customary law because law should be very important for us as a right-based organization. We believe in its power to level the playing field. In theory the law should occupy a position above all of us. We should all be subject to the law, the same law. That is what we mean when we talk about rule of law.

But how well do we really understand what the law is, especially in our field work?

LEGAL PLURALISM

Ideally all countries should be operating under the rule *of* law. That is, the country has in place legal systems in which everyone—and I mean everyone, including the country's leaders and elites, as well as its common citizens—are subject to the same laws. A country with rule of law means that the law is the highest authority in the land. Unfortunately, many countries exist in a state of what the Australian historian David Marr says for Vietnam is rule *by* law. That is, the country's elite use the law to rule everyone else, but do not apply the law to themselves.

Be that as it may, what kind of law or laws are we actually dealing with in the field? We often have a situation of legal pluralism. What do we mean by that? Even if we have rule of law, in fact, we may not be living just under one set of laws. We exist in a world of multiple legal systems, a world of legal pluralism, especially in developing countries. For example, we have:

Statutory law, the law of the state or *black letter law*, is best known to us in advanced industrialized countries. It is the law on the books, or the statutes, but it is not the only normative regime affecting people's lives.

Customary law, sometimes called folk law, and also *religious law*. One example would be Shariah Law. These normative regimes are interpenetrating and not always mutually consistent. They can and often do compete with one another for supremacy. For example, land rights in Mali can be interpreted according to national law, which was largely derived initially from French colonial law, Muslim law, and customary law. All three are mutually influencing and mutually competing for authority. The scene is set for some confusion.

At a lesser level of formality and visibility, there are also customs, habits, and common behaviors. We usually do not call these law, but the difference between customs and customary law can sometimes be subtle. For the example, a

woman might wear the wrong pattern dress for a certain ceremony. That might violate custom, but maybe not customary law, and there might be no sanction, other than the usual gossip. But, someone who takes irrigation water out of turn and without due respect may have broken customary law, and might have to suffer the consequences by enduring some sort of sanction, maybe a fine, a water penalty, social shunning, etc. Customary law is developed, interpreted, and enforced locally. Customary law is also dynamic and changing. The notion that customary law is set in stone and unchanging is manifestly wrong. Customary law changes with the times. However, sometimes what people say is the customary law harkens back to what it once was or was presumed to have been, so we need to be careful in what we think we know. To understand what the actual law is requires observing customary law in action.

People who study these interlocking normative regimes in this pluralistic legal environment are often called legal anthropologists. You are a legal anthropologist if you started out as an anthropologist and then move to incorporate legal concepts, or, alternatively, you would be an anthropological lawyer if you started out studying law and later moved to incorporate field law in your analysis.

The Commission on Folk Law and Legal Pluralism is one professional group that studies the interconnections between different legal regimes. It examines how these legal systems interconnect, how they express themselves, and how people manage their way through them.

SHOPPING FORUMS

In practice people actively seek to maneuver through these various normative regimes, to find the best deal for themselves in this pluralistic legal landscape.

People use what are called “shopping forums,” looking for the best place to find justice. People will actively seek out the legal forum that they think is going to give them the best deal. For example, a person may appeal to customary law on one issue, religious law for another, and statutory law for a third, depending on which is likely to produce the best deal. Or, for example, a person may take a land case to a customary law venue, lose the case, then take it to religious court, and finally to a civil court. (Keebet von Benda-Beckmann, a Dutch legal anthropologist, has done considerable work studying shopping forums.)

In negotiating their way through these multiple legal domains, people are usually willing to accept a level of cognitive dissonance and ambiguity that formally trained lawyers have trouble tolerating. (My father was both a lawyer and an engineer. As you might guess, he was someone who had trouble with ambiguity! He was happy with my choice of career, but never could quite figure out what I did!)

This duality of where to seek justice and apply the law—statutory/customary; formal/less formal—can make cases difficult to adjudicate. Which venue to hear a case in? Which codes to refer to? What precedent to refer to in making a decision? This provides a lot of room for negotiation and a lot of ambiguity.

Some countries have separate court systems—e.g., marriage may be governed by a dual system—civil law unions and customary law unions; land cases also by a dual system—customary law and statutory law. Criminal law might be handled by statutory law, but customary law has its own sanctions that may be applied before a case ever goes to before a state court. The permutations are many.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CUSTOMARY LAW

Customary law can encompass many areas of life and livelihoods—rites of passages, control over natural resources, indigenous technical knowledge, and inheritance, to name a few. The Prophet Muhammad is reputed to have said in one of the hadiths, “Learn the laws of inheritance for they are the bulk of all knowledge that is useful.” (Apologies if this quotation is a rough paraphrase.)

Customary law often orders access to, and distribution of, benefits for some forms of individual property and many forms of common pool resources, like land, pastures, forests, fishing waters, and water. Usually customary law is unwritten, but there are exceptions, e.g., the *riwaj-i-abpashi* is a written customary law narrative regarding ownership and management of irrigation water in Northern Pakistan. The *awig-awig* is a similar set of laws about irrigation water in Bali. The Law of Manu in India is an example that pertains to the caste system.

Customary law sometimes is recorded in the form of epic stories or poems, or songs or proverbs and sayings. However, what is actually practiced as customary has usually evolved from whatever happens to be written, or even spoken. Sometimes customary law is pretty rigid—e.g., the caste system in India; or punishment for adultery in Afghanistan. But customary law can also be dynamic—e.g., a Balinese water users’ association (subak) may change its rules about water use and distribution over time as the range of rice varieties available or the water supply changes. Customary law is not static; it changes over time, through use and interpretation, not through legislation. So, the stereotypes about customary law being static and outmoded, or not keeping up with the times, may be right in some cases. But in my experience those stereotypes are often wrong.

Unfortunately, customary law is largely invisible to the state, unless it has been explicitly acknowledged in statutory legislation. (Cf., the Ancestral Domains Act in the Philippines and various positive aboriginal laws in Canada and Australia based on patterns of customary land use and local mapping that give significant statutory legal control over natural resources to indigenous peoples.) It is easy

for the government to ignore customary law when it is convenient for them to do so. This is particularly common regarding community use rights over valuable natural resources.

In my experience in Indonesia, following the precepts of customary law means that one has to be highly conscious of process and politeness. Procedure does matter; good etiquette and attitude are paramount. Ignore the procedure or violate the codes of politeness and you have violated customary law. Western-trained lawyers sometimes have trouble understanding that politeness is part of customary law.

Customary law is birthed locally, administered locally, and it changes locally. It can be quite different from one valley to the next. It is not universal. (This is a characteristic that is different from statutory law, and one that creates a lot of angst among statutory lawyers, as statutory law seeks to subject everyone to the same legal framework). Precedents matter, but within a very circumscribed geographic area, because of the highly local nature of each version of customary law.

Minangkabau and Batak (two ethnic groups in Sumatra) have different customary laws. For example, the former is a matrilineal society, the latter a patrilineal one. Kinship rules, a type of customary law regime, are different. But even among the Minangkabau we should not assume that customary law in, say, Lintau is exactly the same as in Sumpur Kudus, one valley to the east. There is a Minangkabau proverb

Lain padang lain belalang

Lain lubuak lain ikannyo

Different fields, different grasshoppers

Different fishing holes, different fish

In adjudicating customary law, outcomes (decisions, rulings, and verdicts) depend a lot on the intention of the actors, as well as the actual things they did. For example, polite, well-intentioned people who may have violated the spirit of some elements of customary law may sometimes be forgiven; arrogant people who stayed within the intent of the law may actually sometimes lose their case.

So, with customary law, often the interpretation of the law is highly negotiable. In the enforcement of customary law, the rights of the group may sometimes trump the rights of the individual. For example, the goal of sustainability in the management of particular common property resources management may be factored into customary law and may constrain individual use rights. Customary law can deal with informal or non-corporate groups (e.g., women, landowners, sharecroppers, children, farmer groups, etc.) in a way that statutory law often has difficulty handling.

Thus, customary law is often well adapted to local conditions. But we do not want to over-romanticize customary law, either. Customary law is not always equitable—patterns of land control in Africa, female genital mutilation, caste systems, are just a few areas where customary law might be at odds with contemporary visions of justice. But we have to remember that statutory law is often not fair either!

So, be aware of endemic unfairness when you hear local elites talk about the way things are or were. The view might either be a reasonable characterization of the way things once were but are not now, or an accurate view of the way things are but one that represents a particular elite vision of the way society works.

You will need to dig a little to make a decision on what the operative customary law is and whether the customary law is fair and just or not. To make that determination, you will need to seek the opinions of the people in the most marginalized positions in the society. People living in poverty may view the law quite differently than the elites.

THE EVOLUTION OF CUSTOMARY LAW

How did legal pluralistic societies evolve? Enter the colonial powers. In most areas of the world, the legal codes that we now call statutory law originated with the European powers. They brought them along as they colonized the world.

They relied primarily on statutory law as a way of governing their colonies. In some territories they ruled indirectly through super-empowered native elites, who governed the “natives” for the colonists. The interpretation of the interface between customary law and statutory law was often left to these native elites. In the Dutch East Indies, for example, there were three sets of laws: one for Europeans or whites; one for Eurasians or other persons of color; and one for “natives.” Working out how to adjudicate cases involving interactions between these three groups was a legal nightmare, as the great novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer so eloquently describes in his quartet of novels. If your parentage was mixed white and local, where did you fall in the law? If you had a legal case over land inheritance and your half-brother was full European but you were not, how would you deal with that? If you were a woman and your brother was a man and you were European, but he was half-caste, how do you deal with that? The colonists made all kinds of trouble for themselves when they tried to deal with customary law and statutory law according to one’s skin color.

Furthermore, the colonists actually created the term *customary law*, a term that betrays how the whole phenomenon was understood. They often tried to record customary law and force it into the same conceptual categories they were familiar with in their statutory law. Hence, was born *customary civil law*;

customary criminal law; etc. It was kind of ridiculous, because these categories didn't actually fit local law very well. (Of course, the colonists also had customary law in their home countries, they just didn't think of it in those same terms!)

The colonial powers tended to ossify customary law in the process. For example, in rural West Sumatra the Dutch didn't understand the long cycle of the rise and fall of families over time. They empowered the local elites who happened to be on top when the Dutch gained control. The former power cycle had to do with social obligations. You were taking land in pawn, you were rising up, but as you rose up your social obligations of distributing wealth to the community rose as well, and eventually you had to start letting land out in pawn, and your stature would go down. This is a long cycle, dependent on family-to-family transfers for several generations. When the Dutch came in, they intervened at a particular moment in time, when certain families were high in the local hierarchy and others low. But they didn't understand this, and rigidified the system. They created permanently elite families where none had existed before. (Cf., Christine Dobbin.)

CUSTOMARY LAW IN PRACTICE—THREE CASES

I think the best way to understand some of the dynamics of customary law is to observe it in action. Here are three examples.

Case 1. A new irrigation canal in West Sumatra

Given the importance of water for agriculture, it is not surprising that in many countries there are various customary laws that pertain to its usage. According to customary law in West Sumatra, if I want to dig an irrigation ditch across my neighbor's land to bring water to my land, I have the right to do so, and I do not have to even compensate my neighbor! Yet, if I go out and just start digging, my neighbor would have the right to stop me. Why? Because there is a certain etiquette that must be followed. A proper situation might evolve something like this, involving Person 1 (the person who needs the water) and Person 2 (the person whose land lies between the river and Person 1's land.) Person 2's land is irrigated from a channel higher up, but there is not enough water in that canal to try to extend it to reach Person 1's land.

First conversation:

Person 1: "Say, it looks like you got a really good harvest this year."

Person 2 (downplaying his good fortune): "Oh, it's about average, I guess."

Person 1 (setting the stage for the request): “Well, my own harvest was not so great.” Both Person 1 and Person 2 know what is going on here, but neither mentions it directly at this point.

Second Conversation:

Some days later when the threshing and drying is being done.

Person 1: “Wow! You’ve got a lot of rice this year.”

Person 2: “Well, it’s OK. Just enough for my family.”

Third Conversation

Sometime later when the rice is being milled:

Person 1: “Do you need any help storing your bags of rice?”

Person 2: “No I think I’ve got it under control. But, I was thinking, you might be able to dig a canal across my land so your fields could be irrigated, too.” Thus, Person 2 has actually offered to give some up of his own land, without compensation.

Person 1: “Oh that would be really great! Thank you, thank you! Let’s talk tomorrow about how we might make it happen.”

Analysis.

Both Person 1 and Person 2 know what the customary law is. But Person 1 knows he has to be careful and respectful. He does not bring the water issue up directly. He maneuvers the conversation in such a way that Person 2 eventually makes the offer of an easement through his land for a new canal. Person 1 would be very grateful, of course, and he might invite Person 2 to be the guest of honor every year at a ceremony marking the beginning of the growing season.

Case 2. Mintak aia sabatu, Batang Tampo, West Sumatra

There are 65 irrigation canals that take water off left and right from the 30-kilometer Tampo River in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Because there is a good slope in the valley, just placing a few loose stones in the river is enough to divert water into a canal. Customary law proscribes packing the loose stones with mud or plant matter because that could divert too much water into any one canal and the irrigation canals down below would be starved of water.

When farmers from a canal downstream were not getting enough water, they would come upstream and *mintak aia sabatu*, literally, “ask for a stone’s worth of water.” This means they sought permission to take a couple of stones out of the headworks in the river upstream to let more water flow down to lower canals. If no one was present to reply to this request, the group that came upstream would

pull a few stones out anyway, but they would plant a bamboo staff by the headworks to indicate that the stones had been taken with respect and according to customary law. If the people of the upper canal had a problem with this, they could go down and have a palaver with the people who had taken the stones out of the headworks. But it was all done with great respect.

Unfortunately, in Indonesia in the 1970s and 1980s the Irrigation Department of the Public Works Ministry knew nothing about these arrangements, and they did not try to understand any larger traditional water management system in the valley. They misinterpreted the water flowing downstream through the loose rock headworks as leakage when they should have thought about it as supply for lower canals. They made a number of permanent concrete headworks at various sites along the Tampo River. They only looked at a few canals and not all 65. This disturbed the distribution of water throughout the valley. I will say more about this case in an upcoming seminar on engineering and technology.

Case 3. “The King’s Law Stops at the Village Gate”

When I was working for CARE in Afghanistan we had a rural primary education program for girls and boys. By 2001 we had 23,000 children enrolled, 46 percent of them girls. And this was when the Taliban were still in control! How were we able to do this? The Taliban had already closed the co-ed schools run by the Swedish Committee. Why were our Community-Owned Primary Education (COPE) schools still able to operate?

Local ownership—real ownership—was at the heart of the issue. From the very beginning, whenever we approached a village, we said that we were willing to help with improving the education possibilities, but that any school we developed would be the community’s school, not CARE’s. The community would have to first form a Village Education Committee. The VEC had a minimum of three persons. Usually the VEC was composed of gray-bearded males, most of whom were illiterate themselves, but they cared about their children getting a better education. The community also had to provide a space for the children to learn, and had to provide some form of salary or sustenance for the teacher. CARE provided a curriculum in the Dari language, and trained the teachers.



Afghanistan, Ghazni province, Nawor district, school girls returning home, October 2000. *John Ambler*

When the Taliban came to CARE and ordered that the schools be shut down, we said in all honesty that they were not our schools, that the community owned them. So, they went to the schools to order them closed. In Ghazni province, twice the Taliban ordered schools to close, and twice the villagers told the Taliban to go back to Kabul. They invoked customary law: “The King’s law stops at the village gate.” In other words, the VECs were saying to the Taliban, “You are out of your jurisdiction here. This is our school within our walls, and you do not have the authority to tell us what to do with it.” It was a fantastic illustration of a vibrant customary law, strong local power, and considerable bravery to defend the right of not only the sons but also the daughters, to a basic education.

CUSTOMARY LAW UNDER ASSAULT

In many countries customary law is under assault by the state. There are many reasons. The state cannot control customary law in the same way it can control or influence statutory law. To the state, customary law can be threatening because of the decentralized power it carries. Government authorities often criticize customary law for its presumed backwardness. The overall attitude in government often holds that customary law is outdated, obsolete, old-fashioned, and that statutory law is the modern or progressive form of law.

The state often has difficulty understanding customary law; it finds it difficult to administer, or it considers it primitive, pre-modern, or peculiar. This holds in spite of the fact that in some countries the state continues to even support customary law courts, for example, regarding marriage or inheritance.

Theoretically, the state espouses universality in its norms and consistency in the enforcement of those norms. That is, everyone should be equal under the law. Customary law, on the other hand, has a decidedly local character in scope, and its application varies from place to place and from case to case. The state often views this situation as arbitrary or pre-modern. People, on the other hand, often view customary law as a valid and well-suited local adaptation of general principles.

Over time, the apparatus of the state has been extending its tentacles into even remote areas and bringing with it new legal frameworks. If I think back to when I first started going overseas, in 1975, there were lots of parts of many countries where the state was not present at all. Nowadays, the state really has presence in most areas, in most countries. Through improved roads, air transport, population growth, frontier development, and internal migration, the state really is extending its control in a lot of places.

Because of this, clashes between customary law and statutory law are escalating, and statutory law seems to be winning. State laws are entering more and more social venues; people are becoming ever more familiar with the state calling the shots in so many dimensions of their lives. Changes in modern day social norms do argue against some inequitable practices accepted under customary law. This is putting pressure on statutory law. For example, female genital mutilation is something most of us would like to see eradicated, but customary law in many places continues to hold sway.

But there is a lot in customary law worth fighting for also, including ownership or use rights.

OWNERSHIP OR USE RIGHTS

Oral traditions in customary law are often people's only proof of historical ownership or traditional use rights over many natural resources—land, water, trees, fish, game and other common pool resources. The verbal narrative about use patterns in natural resources is part of customary law, and in the absence for formal land title, may be all that local people have to buttress their claims of rights over some resources. It may be the only thing standing between people's right to resources and disempowerment entirely.

Governments recognize that these oral claims can be powerful. In Malaysia the government made community forest mapping illegal to prevent people from

staking claims based on their presumed customary use rights! The government would prefer to reserve the land for concessions to timber companies.

Customary law often provides the avenue for demonstrating joint ownership of an asset or collective use rights. By contrast, the structure of statutory law often makes it difficult to deal with *collective* ownership that is not formally incorporated.

In Niger, people revived barren land when local charismatic leaders mobilized new energy around threatened common pool resources. An appeal to customary use rights was a critical part of this movement.

But customary law does not automatically guarantee good stewardship. For example, in Nagaland, India, people and contractors cut down large swaths of forest when they got greater control over it, despite the fact that conferring use rights to the tribals was based on an appeal to customary law.

CUSTOMARY LAW EMBODIES ELEMENTS OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Specific local knowledge, ingenuity, and economy of usage—e.g., forest conservation techniques; water division rules—are often built into customary law. Local knowledge often responds directly to local issues of scarcity, sustainability, and equity.

CUSTOMARY LAW OFTEN PLACES HIGH VALUE ON COHESIVE SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Customary law often supports cohesive social organization at a group or societal level, mutual self-help structures, and mutual respect. The high value placed on issues of respect suggest that customary law is just as much about achieving harmony as about achieving justice, *per se*. It's about coming up with a result that people can live with. That result may look different from place to place, even though the circumstances of the case might appear the same. A major consideration in the adjudication of a customary law case can be what solution will leave the best end result in terms of harmony in the community and harmony between the litigants. This may produce a slightly different judgment than what would have been rendered if the only consideration had been who is right.

CUSTOMARY LAW IS IMPORTANT FOR OXFAM

In our community-level work, we need to be alert to customary law. First of all, it exists—it's there! Just because it may not be written down, does not mean that it does not exist. Learn it; understand its logic; assess it from the point of view of how it affects people living in poverty. Don't try to initiate any action without first understanding how local customary law may relate. If you ignore it, you can be sure there will be trouble. Customary law will still be operative and cause problems if you try to superimpose new structures without co-designing new arrangements with the community. Knowing local customary law is also a window into understanding local power dynamics.

Second, make customary law visible to the state—the good and even the not so good aspects of it. It is sometimes people's only claim to rights and resources that the state may covet.

Much customary law is about honor and process. Whatever we do, we should understand those concepts. Otherwise, we will not get the ownership, equity, and responsibility dimensions I talked about in the last seminar. Learn both the procedural characteristics of customary law, as well as its stated principles of customary law. If you violate the procedure of customary law, you will have violated the law, and offended people. Don't over-generalize about any particular stricture or stipulation in customary law. Customary law can be very local and different from place to place. Don't over romanticize it, but don't underestimate it either. It can be a force for good. Think how customary law could be changed for the better, or how useful principles in customary law might be incorporated into statutory law and government regulations.

In sum, customary law is rarely perfect, but it is a living, breathing, continually changing manifestation of how communities structure their local social order, and how they conceptually order their world in normative terms. Understanding customary law in each context is essential for understanding how to approach the issues of co-design, co-investment, and real ownership that I talked about in the last seminar.

Q & A PERIOD

Q: “John, do you have any comments on, or experience with, when statutory law is more in line with a rights-based approach? How do you shift customary law? Because from what I gather you can have a law on the books, but if customary law doesn't recognize it—doesn't support it—it may as well not have practical force as statutory law. So, can you talk a little bit about how you get customary law to shift?”

John: “You know, it goes both ways. Statutory law sometimes runs roughshod over customary law, and customary law sometimes takes priority over statutory law. How do you get customary law to shift? Well, that’s where we talk about shifting attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. That I see partially as an intergenerational effort, and a lot of it doesn’t have to do anything with us or what we do. It has to do with people being integrated into national systems. It has to do with people getting access to news in ways they didn’t have before. It has to do with people being involved in debates that they weren’t involved in before. Take the female genital mutilation issue. People weren’t involved in that debate 50 years ago, because there was no debate. It was just something you did. Now people are starting to question it, because there is a dialogue and a discourse about whether this is a good thing or not.

“These are the hardest parts of customary law to deal with: when they violate what we consider now to be better, more ethical behavior. But at least if you have a law that says, ‘This is banned,’ you can say, ‘Well this is banned, and here’s why.’ So, you have some legal backing to justify your case. When you don’t have a statutory law that’s any good, then you’re left with nothing *but* customary law, and that can be difficult if it doesn’t accord with modern norms.

“I don’t have a good answer for you; this is a long-term process. It’s probably the most difficult thing. In fact, when I see a proposal that says, ‘We’ll change people’s attitudes about X, Y, and Z,’ I think, ‘Okay, how long are you going to live?’ It’s possible. I think about attitudes towards a lot of things, in the past half-century—they’ve changed. Less than a hundred years ago, most women in most countries couldn’t vote at all. That’s something that’s changed, and we can go through a lot of examples like that. So, it is possible, but some of these are longer-term issues.”

Q: “Can the basis of customary and statutory law in large part be economic? As you said, the presence of the state has become more widespread than it used to be, but it still is pretty sketchy in some places, and the states’ justice ministries have very little resources, few judges. So, if you are a poor person living in the village and you have a conflict with your neighbor who is also a poor person, it is just much easier to just go with what you have—the local chief or the local person who administers the customary law, and then your problem can be solved, rather than going to the court, which has a huge backlog of things to attend to. And then you need a lawyer and whole procedure. So, poor people exclusively tend to rely on customary law, and that would be the key part to perpetuate customary law, even if the law is different under statutory law. But then what’s tricky is when a poor person has a conflict with a business or some kind of formal entity who wouldn’t go to the local chief, and who would be mad if there was a conflict that happens in the former...”

John: “Yeah, and this is a good point, because we find this a lot in our extractive industries work, where we’ve got foreign mining companies or domestic mining companies. *They’re* not going to appeal to customary law; they’re going to deal

with statutory law. That's how they got their permits, that's where they've done their licensing, and where they've got their sanctions. That's who they pay royalties to—it's all in the formal sphere. They're dealing with communities who are trying to appeal to their rights sometimes on the basis of customary law, and we have a real clash there.”

Q: “In Haiti they have a couple of proverbs that deal with the justice system—how that would be the absolute last resort for those in rural populations. It would be something that would be the absolute last thing to consider for resolving any kind of issue.”

John: “The formal legal system's something people want to avoid. It's expensive, it's convoluted and arcane, it drags on forever, and you may not get the result you want. At least in a customary legal forum you have some influence over the result because you have more engagement with the actors who are deciding the case. And if the harmony outcome is part of the calculation in the decision, then you have a much better chance of getting something you can live with using customary law, rather than using statutory law.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- How would you approach a community that is abiding by customary law that we think is not right in the 21st century, like female genital mutilation?
- How does customary law influence statutory law and vice versa?
- Does corruption play itself out differently in customary law compared to statutory law?
- Do we look at legal pluralism and shopping forums differently from an anthropological perspective compared to a formal statutory legal perspective?



Ker Heun waters the vegetable garden owned by his mother Svey Mon in Prey Cheuteal village, Kampot Province, Cambodia. *Patrick Brown / Panos for Oxfam America*

4

**How much can illiterate farmers manage?
How much can poor farmers afford?**

In the first seminar we learned how to catch rats with perfumed soap. In the second one we learned how to avoid bad language. In the third one we learned how to evade the law, and in this fourth one we're going to learn how to underestimate farmers.

No, seriously, there is a battle raging over who can manage natural resources and at what scale. Government officials, donors, private sector companies, even some NGOs (those with a charity orientation, primarily), often assume that smallholder farmers are severely limited in their ability to manage natural resources, like land and water. They say, "Well, farmers have a low level of educational attainment; we don't have many good examples of farmer management at scale; cooperatives are in a bad state; farmers have trouble accessing markets." So, they cite all of this as evidence to suggest that farmers are not good managers. They also believe that farmers don't have very much money to invest in their natural resources—in the agriculture, in the forestry, and in other resources.

I want us to interrogate those assumptions, and ask how much farmers actually can pay or are willing to pay. How much farmers can manage, or are willing to manage. I'm going to draw my examples primarily from the field of irrigation management, but we'll make some parallels with other fields as well.

Government irrigation officials in Asia, for example, like to cite the following four arguments to support their contention that farmers can't manage much:

1. They say that in large irrigation systems, despite written agreements and negotiations with water users' associations, farmers consistently fail to maintain the tertiary canals to the required level. After all, the better the condition of these canals, the better it would be for the farmers' own lands. So, the fact that they don't maintain the canals properly must be evidence that they cannot, right?
2. Farmers plead poverty and do not pay their irrigation service fees, especially in large irrigation systems. This is quite common. Farmers claim that they are too poor to pay, and if they are that poor how can they be good managers? Whom should we believe, though: the farmers or the government? Well, we'll come back to this question.
3. Irrigation engineers are willing to concede that farmers can manage small-scale or "minor" irrigation. (That's defined in India as command areas less than 500 hectares, in Indonesia as less than 200 hectares, or in Bhutan just less than 40 hectares.) But they say that systems larger than that need professional engineers and water management specialists. I used to hear this all the time. So, are these norms—500, 200, 40 hectares—reasonable? Or are they self-fulfilling prophecies? You have to wonder. First of all, if an engineer in one country says, "Farmers can manage up to 500 hectares," and in another country says, "Farmers can only manage up to 40 hectares," that seems strange. Are farmers in one country less capable than in others?

Probably not. So, that seems arbitrary right there, and something seems fishy about the norms.

4. Irrigation engineers are fond of saying that examples of large farmer-managed irrigation systems are absent.

SO LET'S EXAMINE THESE STATEMENTS

Well, it is true that farmers don't maintain the tertiary canals near their land very well in big irrigation systems. But we shouldn't automatically assume that they would not if their circumstances were different. So, why don't they, and why won't they?

If we think about the management of the main irrigation canals (these are the big canals that take water out of the river and feed into secondary canals, or branch canals, and then branch off into tertiary canals), I think we'll find some problems. If the farmers never know when they're going to get their water, or they never know how much is going to come, logically that is a big disincentive for investing a lot of labor for the maintenance of the canal. They just don't know how it's going to operate, or how reliable it's going to be. So, in effect, the poor management of the main system is actually a demotivating factor for the farmers to do their part on the lower levels of the system.

For the same reason, farmers don't like to pay their irrigation service fees, claiming with good justification that the service they receive is so bad that it is unfair for them to have to pay a fee. If they have no control over the service (e.g., no representation on the water boards or no involvement in main system management), and if the service is bad, the engineers who report to a distant and aloof government are difficult to hold accountable. So, you have these engineers reporting to a government bureaucracy rather than to the farmers or farmers' associations. And, in these irrigation systems, once the water has entered the canal, it's got to go somewhere, right? It's not going to go back to the river; it's actually got to come through the system somehow. So, even if you don't pay your irrigation service fees, you're probably going to get some water, even if the flow and volume may not be reliable. So, why pay if you're going to get some water anyway?

Why is the main system of these irrigation systems so bad? And, by the way, although you might think that irrigation is kind of a specialized technical topic, one-third of the world's agricultural land is irrigated, and it produces half of the world's agricultural produce. So, irrigation is often anchoring communities; it's often providing the surplus for deficit areas within countries and providing the surplus for international agricultural trade. There was a big boom in irrigation development in the 1960s and 1970s, even up to the 1990s. But in the last 10 years for ecological or environmental reasons, there's been a big slowdown in

the development of new irrigation systems. We're especially running out of good places to put new dams. New dams are controversial, another topic we don't have time for today.

But, coming back to the management issue, why are these irrigation systems—the big ones—so poorly managed in some cases? Well, you've got all kinds of stuff going on. You've got farmers bribing irrigation officials to get more water; you've got farmers at the head end of the system (that's near the source of the water) growing water-consumptive crops like sugarcane; you've got leaks and other kinds of conveyance losses; you've got farmers not planting according to a regular schedule or planting different kinds of crops with different water consumption needs. That makes it very difficult to manage the big systems.

What if we think about irrigation as a metaphor for some other fields—such as schools and education? Main-system management in irrigation can be likened to the government providing the basic service: the schools, the teachers, the curriculum, the books, etc. And we know from so many experiences that governments often fail in that regard. Do you want to send your kid to public school if you don't even know if the teacher's going to show up? Do you want to send your kid to school if the building was so shoddily-built that it may fall down on the kids at any moment? Do you want to send your kid to school if the curriculum is based on a national curriculum that has little relevance to your particular part of the country, where you deal with a different kind of environment or a different kind of livelihood and your notion of nation state may be very weak? So, there are a lot of inappropriate things happening in the main system, as it were.

You can think about the same thing in health. In some government health clinics the doctor pays more attention to his private practice than to the government practice or medicines are inadequate or out of stock. No wonder people go to local healers! That can create vicious cycles, frustrating for both the professional medical community and people who are seeking health services.

Coming back to irrigation now. In many government irrigation systems, farmers were never consulted about the design of the system. They were never brought into discussions on how it was going to be managed, and they were never given the opportunity or the requirement to invest in the system. A couple of weeks ago when we were talking about bad development language, we talked about *sense of ownership* versus *real ownership*. We talked about how important it is to have co-design and co-investment in the process to build real ownership. Many times farmers are just left as subordinate appendages to these large systems run by a sometimes corrupt, sometimes inefficient, always inadequate bureaucracy.

As far as the requirement that farmers dig tertiary canals in these big systems, they often adopt a wait-and-see attitude, saying things to the effect of, "Maybe if we wait, the government will get another loan from the World Bank and they'll come in and do it for us," and so, they hang back. There's no penalty if they hang

back, other than not getting the water in the way that they really should. But sometimes the idea that they should be digging the tertiary canals can seem like a tax, or like a penalty. 'You have to do this' almost harkens back to some of the compulsory labor regimes of the colonial period. You might have better luck getting farmers to do some of those management tasks if you actually involve them in the management of the irrigation system, rather than just treating them like raw labor.

So I think a lot of times what we have is not an inability to manage but an unwillingness to manage. Typically, farmers have not been given the opportunity or incentives to manage.

HOW MUCH CAN FARMERS ACTUALLY MANAGE?

The scale of an irrigation system is one interesting parameter. The government believes that farmer can handle minor irrigation, which is about 500 hectares or less in India, 200 hectares or less in Indonesia, and 40 hectares or less in Bhutan.

However, we should not assume that those are the limits of what farmers can manage. Look at some of the *tank systems* in southern India. A *tank* is a curved or chevron-shaped dirt embankment that impounds water from small creeks or rain catchment areas and creates a little reservoir. Out of that they distribute water to the irrigator members. Some tanks irrigate over a thousand hectares. Those were built in ancient times, actually, and the fact that many of the larger ones are managed by the government now makes us forget that historically they used to be managed by farmers.

Engineers are surprised when I pull out that little fact. And, they're even more surprised when I tell them that in Nepal there's a farmer-managed irrigation system in the Terai (the low-lying area near the border between Nepal and India) that's over 5,000 hectares. Now, supposing that each farmer has just one to one-and-a-half hectares of land. That's 5,000 to 7,000 farmers. That's a lot of people to coordinate, but farmers have developed the organization to do it! This system is completely built and managed by the farmers alone without any external help at all. So, this makes the engineers a little nervous.

They really get nervous when I tell them that in Taiwan, there are farmer-managed systems of over 100,000 hectares. They respond, "That's impossible! For 100,000 hectares you need professional irrigation engineers. You need professional water management specialists." And I say, "Yeah, that's right. And in Taiwan those engineers work for the farmers!"

And, why not? Why does the government have to manage big systems? Sure, you need specific technical expertise. But the farmers can pay for that. One

important lesson I draw from all this is that farmers can actually manage a lot more than we think. We just don't usually give them the chance.

By the way, the largest farmer-managed irrigation system (that I know of, anyway) is in California. It's about 450,000 hectares. But that's large scale private commercial farming in the USA, a different animal.

THE ABILITY TO PAY FOR WATER IN THIS CASE

Government officials are fond of saying that farmers are too poor to pay for water. Farmers are fond of saying that, too! But if we look at actual examples, the picture is more complicated. In Gujarat in western India, you find some government-run irrigation systems where the farmers are paying almost nothing for the water. Right next to those systems, you find some river pump irrigation systems managed by tribal groups. Now, the tribals in India are the least educated, the poorest, and assumed to be the most backward group in India. Yet, we find that they are paying for the full cost of irrigation. They're paying for the pumps, the pipes, the cement, and the diesel for the pumps, labor, etc., everything at full cost.

So, how does this happen? The Aga Khan Rural Support Program (India) is helping these groups. They provide the credit; they provide the technical expertise. It's not a matter of education. It's not a matter of ability to pay; it's a matter of willingness to pay. The reason that the farmers are willing to pay is that they own the system. The Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) doesn't own the system—the farmers themselves own the system. And they have good control over the water. That's one of the advantages of a pump system: You pump out what you need and you know that every unit of water that you pump out costs something in terms of diesel. There's no free water there, so they use water more efficiently because they have to pay the full cost of the water.

So again, this is an issue of the willingness to pay versus the ability to pay. The AKRSP is important because it provides credit and technical assistance, which are hard for tribal groups to access. So, again, it's not an ability to pay issue.

Authority over the resource is essential but not sufficient. Practical control over the management of the water and control over the facilities to capture and convey the water is essential. When farmers have a clear mandate over these resources, and clear management positions, then they have shown that they are capable of paying a lot more than the government ever imagined they would.

The relationship between management and payment, between control and willingness to pay is an issue that I touched on in one of the earlier discussions, about maintenance. We don't think about maintenance that much, but maintenance is a huge issue. I led several high-ranking delegations of Vietnamese to the United States in the late 1990s. When we came to New York,

the first reaction was, “Wow, look at these skyscrapers! How much did these things cost? Imagine the engineering that went into these!” But I remember one very clever guy, he was one of my favorite friends back in Vietnam, he said, “How do you maintain these things?” He was interested not only in the technical aspects of maintaining the buildings, but what kind of financial and organizational arrangements do you put into place to maintain this kind of infrastructure? It was really an insightful question.

But I can’t emphasize enough how important maintenance is. Let’s return to the work Oxfam America did in northern Ethiopia in Tigray. The Adiha irrigation system is one of my favorite projects. It’s been operating and improving since 1996. That’s 20 years. The farmers manage everything. They adjust the gates and the turnouts, divide the water, and do the routine maintenance. But the last time I was there, there was some sign of decay in the concrete near the headworks. And we said, “Why don’t you guys fix this? This could become serious.” And they kind of looked around and they said, “Well, REST owns the system.” (REST is the NGO that we gave the grant to in order to build the system.) And Tecklaweini, the head of REST, says, “No, this is your system!” And they said, “Well, we thought it was your system.” Even after 20 years after this was not clear to all parties!

So, we’ve got to deal with the ownership issue early on, and we’ve got to make sure it’s real clear who owns what and who has what responsibilities. If push came to shove, maybe REST thinks Oxfam has the responsibility to pay for repairs. We didn’t pursue it that far. But when farmers think that somebody else owns the property in the end, we find time and time again that farmers will not do the maintenance or the repairs, even if it hurts themselves—because they think that somebody else has the responsibility to do it.

So, in our own work, whenever we’re developing some kind of physical asset that’s going to need maintenance, or whether we’re developing trees that need protection or crops that need guarding, we need to think in terms of making those agreements with the communities formal. Now, we can harken back to our customary law discussion to think about what kind of formality makes sense. Maybe it’s not a document; maybe it’s a formal meeting or meal with the clan leaders. Or maybe it is a document, that you actually register with a local government agency, saying, “This is the property of the Adiha Water Users’ Association; they’re responsible for it.” Anyway, we need to think about making ownership formal, because we can’t just assume that farmers will think that it’s their property or behave as if it’s their property if they don’t know it for sure, or if they think they can get away with somebody else paying for maintenance.

ON THE CYNICAL SIDE

You know that I'm never cynical, but sometimes doubt creeps in and one wonders what government, private sector, and sometimes NGOs actually know about farmers and their ability and willingness to manage and to pay. It's a lot easier for them to follow the disempowering charity model: "We'll *give* you something; we'll *provide* it for you."

For government, it's easy because that way they don't have to involve farmers or local people in the messy social organizational aspects of development. They just provide the infrastructure and say, "Now this is yours." We know that rarely works in the long run, but it's a lot easier if you're in a technical agency that's never been trained in social approaches and your staff are all engineers, agronomists, or other technical staff. It's just a whole lot easier to not worry about maintenance and just say, "Here, it's yours," and go on your merry way. But, even if your agency is held accountable, you might defer maintenance and then apply for a big World Bank loan to renovate this and other deteriorating systems. More money for the pipe line.

A final point on cost. If you involve people in the design of the work you can actually lower the cost, because people will have ideas about how to strip away unnecessary costs. They'll have ideas about what is really necessary and what's not. We've seen in our own irrigation work in Ethiopia that we can develop irrigation at about \$3,500 per hectare, while the government uses a norm as \$7,000 per hectare for small-scale irrigation. So, we are developing irrigation at basically half the cost of government-built systems. We are able to do this because we're involving farmers from the beginning and we show farmers how to formally record the investment from each farmer.

So, there are huge benefits to co-design and co-investment with farmers. But the approach has to be a business-style approach. That's what I want to leave you with today.

Q & A PERIOD

Q: "I have a question about the possible tension when we fully give ownership to communities. What are the outcomes when certain groups are excluded, when the leadership or the farmers in that community don't see women as equal stakeholders? What would then be Oxfam's role to try to bring equality but also leave ownership in their community?"

John: "It goes back to the discussion and design phase of the work. You've got to involve all the people that you want to be owners or stakeholders in that system at that time. You can't just assume that because you talk to the men that the women will get benefit from something. You can't just assume that because

you involve the women in the design that they will necessarily have their agreements honored later on. This is why I think it's so important to establish relationships with local organizations—which we do; we work mostly through local partners who have a closer relationship to those communities—because things can go very differently, after a while, than the way you planned them. But if you don't plan the most marginalized people into the design in the beginning, you're almost certainly not going to get them when it comes time to divide the benefits.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- What would you do to ensure real ownership for women and minorities in the structure of organizations that manage village-held resources?
- Why does government consistently underestimate how much local people can manage?
- How would you speed managerial innovations like farmers paying technical staff to manage water? What resistance might you encounter?



Oxfam America and the development organization RACHANA helped farmers in Cambodia using the System of Rice Intensification to develop a special weeder tool they can use between rows of SRI rice.
Patrick Brown / Panos for Oxfam America

5

Who's the engineer here? Technology, customary law, and local knowledge vs. expert knowledge

PREFACE

In past seminars we have talked about customary law and farmers' ability to manage natural resources. I hope you took away the understanding that farmers can actually manage quite a lot, if given the chance, the training, and the incentives, and that customary law can sometimes provide a powerful guiding framework for the management of those resources. Today I want to take you through a case study that shows how those issues can play themselves out in practice when they interact with expert technology, the type found in the formal world of science and engineering. I will again draw on research I did on water management in Sumatra in the 1980s. What I want you to remember at the end of this hour are four things:

- Traditional technology is not just disembodied gadgetry. It often has considerations of customary law embedded in it;
- What looks simple at first glance is often not so simple. It may look the way it does because of considerations of cost, ergonomics, ecology, or customary law factors;
- You cannot automatically deduce this just by looking at a technology. You have to ask detailed questions about it or to see it in action to understand the underlying logic;
- You have to adequately understand the boundaries of the system you are working with. They may be wider than you initially suspect.

ON TECHNOLOGY...

Let's be clear and not overly romantic. Traditional technology and techniques are not always the best for present day conditions or for changing times. There is no traditional equivalent of the submersible pump, for example, or a traditional version of the Hoover Dam. But traditional technology often does have a strong internal logic. And sometimes that logic still has relevance. The logic behind traditional knowledge may be ecological. It may be well-adapted to the local environment. For example, traditional cultivars of seeds can be adapted to the local ecology. Certain agronomic practices (like leaving rocks in the field in semi-arid Turkey as a moisture retention technique) are locally appropriate. Or, the logic may be *economic*; it may be cheaper than some kind of modern technology and adapted to very local level economic conditions. For instance, bamboo water wheels in Vietnam and Indonesia versus pumps, under certain conditions. Of course, a bamboo water wheel doesn't irrigate as much, but in the situations where they are present, there is usually not a lot of land that could be irrigated anyway. Or, the technology used may be *ergonomic* and save labor, stress, or

workload. Examples of this include the Andean foot plow and the automatic flushing gates used in hill irrigation. We'll hear more about those gates later.

Traditional technology may also have a *legal* logic behind it; it may connect somehow to customary law and resource rights. Quite frequently, use of traditional technology has a logic that combines several of these elements.

New technology can make older wisdom obsolete. The Green Revolution gave us seeds with shorter growing seasons that made double cropping possible. This required changes in water and labor management practices in rice growing countries. Likewise, the simple technology of the bore well changed agriculture in many regions of the world. You can now pump water up at times of the year when you could never grow things before. On the other hand, older wisdom can sometimes ultimately reemerge triumphant over new techniques. The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) techniques used in the 1930s in Tamil Nadu in Southern India by champion farmers, now are coming back within the logic of SRI to be more sustainable. It's come full circle. Also in India, traditional water structures like bhils, tanks, and kuhls are being partially revived.

But again, don't over-romanticize traditional wisdom; it is not always wise. Take for instance the many damaging superstitions about health. In Nepal, it is common for pregnant women not to eat leafy green vegetables. Clearly, this is a bad idea, because pregnant women need the iron. According to *masuk angin* in Java, you supposedly get a cold from strong air entering your body. So, if you ride in a bus in rural Java and the windows are all shut tight and everybody's sweating and breathing in each other's noxious fumes rather than fresh air. In Bali, it is believed that your enemies can make you sick through casting the evil eye. In India, the back axles of Tata trucks are adorned with protections against just such evil eyes.

The case I present today shows how *ergonomics*, *ecology*, *economics*, and *customary law* can all play a role in technological choice. I will use the example of the Tampo River basin in Lintau, West Sumatra, Indonesia.

THE TAMPO RIVER BASIN

The Tampo River is about 30 kilometers long. Sixty five small-scale irrigation canals take water off the river left and right over the course of the river. That's one canal every 500 meters on average.

The area irrigated by each canal ranges from five hectares to about 150 hectares. The valley is unusual in that there is a big dormant volcano at the head of the valley and then two ridges of tower karst that make the borders of the valley. The valley, then, is wider at its head than at its tail. At the very bottom of the valley the land is too narrow for much rice area and the riverbed starts to drop significantly below the surrounding land as the slope of the land levels off.

Here farmers have developed bamboo and wood water wheels that lift water from the river up two to three meters and irrigate a maximum of two hectares each.



Water wheels, Bou, West Sumatra, 2012. The wheel on the bottom left is still under construction. *John Ambler*

TECHNOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

Below is a simple drawing of a traditional weir or headworks technology in hill irrigation.

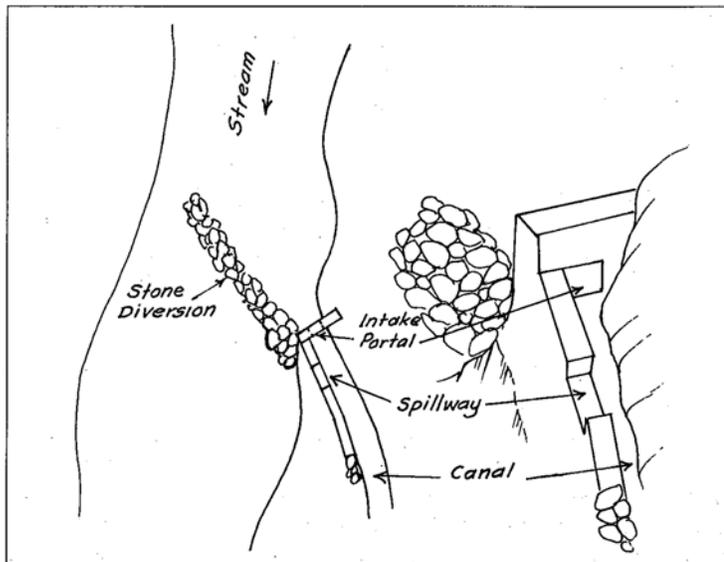


Figure 1. Farmer-designed intake in Lintau, West Sumatra, Indonesia. *John Ambler. A comparison of Farmer and engineer designed diversion weirs and intakes in West Sumatra and Indonesia, in Designing Irrigation Structures for Mountainous Environments. IIMI. Colombo, Sri Lanka 1984. Pgs 46-51.*

A pile of loose rocks in the river is sufficient to divert water into a canal. Plus, it washes away in a flood, thereby saving the canal. The labor needed to rebuild it is quite minimal because rocks are readily available and the required height of the weir is low. Farmers also use an intake portal to prevent excess water from coming into the canal. The whole point is to protect the main canal. If too much water enters the canal it will breach and can only be reconstructed at great cost. Just to be sure, farmers make the canal wall just inside the portal a bit lower to allow return flow back to the river in cases where water pressure through the portal is very high.

There's also an ergonomic part; everything operates automatically. If a heavy rain comes in the middle of the night, the stone weir itself will wash away. That's good; the portal is also protecting the entrance of the canal from too much water getting in. No gatekeeper has to get up in the middle of the night, negotiate a treacherous canal embankment in the pouring rain in the dark, and open a lock or manipulate any gates. He can sleep peacefully until the morning. And there's an economic part, too; all parts of the system are cheap.

There was also a relationship between this simple technology and local customary law, known as *Mintak aia sabatu* ("ask for a stone's worth of water"). If an irrigation system lower down on the river needed more water a delegation of farmers would walk upstream to an upper headworks and ask for a "stone's worth of water." By taking out a few rocks from the weir, more water would flow downstream to the canals lower down. Negotiations regarding exactly how many stones could be taken out could be contentious, but it was all done with respect. If no one happened to be present when the downstream delegation arrived, the visitors could take out some rocks by themselves. But they would plant a bamboo pole in the ground at the spot to indicate that the water had been taken with respect. If the farmers in the upper system had trouble with this, then they could send a delegation downstream to discuss it further. There was actually a prohibition on packing the stones in the weir with mud because that would divert too much water into any one canal, leaving lower canals with an insufficient supply of water.

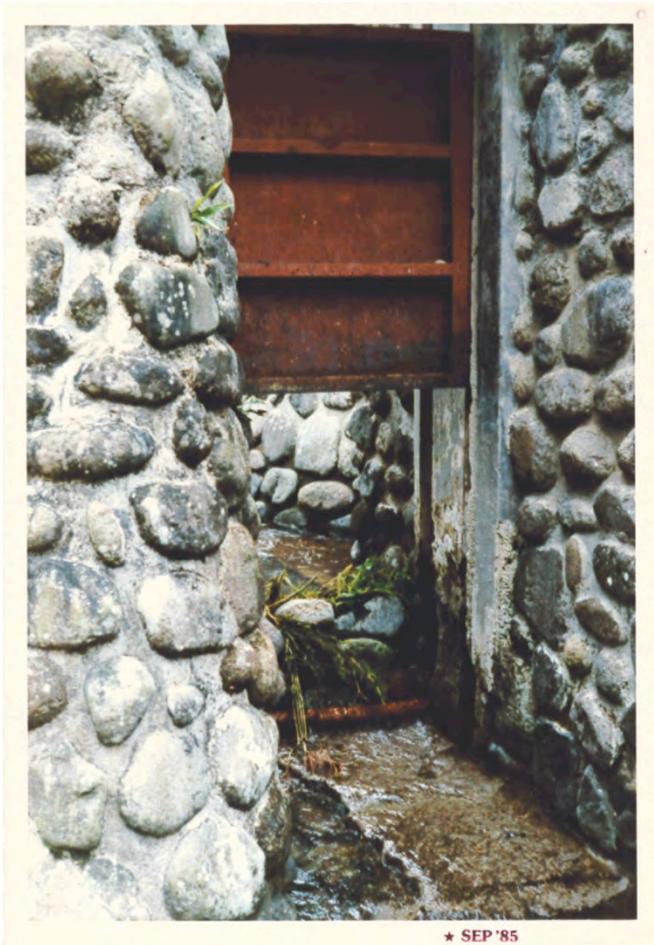
Enter the government engineer, ostensibly trying to help. (I am not going to go into a treatise here on the engineering mind and psyche. For that, read engineer Samuel Florman's classic book *The Existential Pleasures of Engineering*. But suffice it to say, that engineers often take pleasure in building what can be built rather than what should be built. They like the challenge.)

The Indonesian government in the late 1970s and early 1980s assisted about 20 of the largest of the 65 canals along the Tampo River through an irrigation improvement program. Well, if you're an engineer and you look at this system, what would you think? What would you improve? A pile of rocks for the headworks, the traditional technology, looks very primitive to the trained engineering eye. Engineers, in Indonesia, as elsewhere, are taught that the first thing you have to do in building an irrigation system is to raise the head of water

to get it into a canal. This makes sense in areas where the land is relatively flat and large rivers are making their way through potentially irrigable lands, but this maxim does not hold in hilly environments. But the textbooks typically do not mention anything about hilly environments.

The engineers were right in assessing that if the headworks, or *weir*, were made more permanent, they could divert more water into the canal and potentially irrigate a larger area. But, the water they saw apparently leaking through the loose pile of rocks they wrongly interpreted as losses to the irrigation system they wanted to improve. They failed to see that one man's loss is the downstream man's gain. Loss to the system was actually water supply for lower down canals. The loose rock weir actually doubled as a type of water *division* device that accommodated multiple users along the same river course. It was not just a water *diversion* device. Yet, putting in a solid concrete weir seemed to be the answer to the government engineers because they knew nothing about the customary law regarding water division along the river course, and how the traditional technology supported that. Farmers told me the engineers never asked them anything about their water management system. Nor did they require farmers to co-invest in the improvements, which would have forced them to ask farmers what they needed and were willing to pay for. For their part, the farmers would have preferred investments in the main canal, like canal lining, which is susceptible to seepage losses.

The engineers did maintain the portal and the lower sill, but because the weir is permanent (i.e., there was now no pile of rocks to wash away when the river starts flooding), they needed to install a flushing gate to save the canal during times of high flow. The rising stem gate (as befits its name!) has to be raised, however, to let water flow through and back to the river. This means that if it suddenly starts to rain really hard, a gatekeeper has to get up in the middle of the night, negotiate a slippery and treacherous canal embankment in the pouring rain, in the dark, open the padlock on the gate, and raise it to let water return to the river and preserve the main canal. Finally, it is important to note that after these supposed improvements had been made, the government took over formal management of the canal and headworks from the farmers. We saw last week how ridiculous this can be. Farmers can manage irrigation systems much larger than these, and there was no reason to believe that farmers could not have again managed their own systems after the improvements. This was part of the Indonesian government's progressive accumulation of assets, and it was rapidly taking over assets and control from farmers. (There is also the issue of corruption. Bigger investments mean bigger budgets and more opportunities to skim off money.)



Indonesia, West Sumatra, Lintau, (1985) farmer modification of public works technology. *John Ambler*

Now, reenter the farmer-engineer. What does the farmer do about this unsatisfactory situation? First, he modifies the headworks to make them function automatically, like the traditional system had done before. So, he opens the rising stem gate all the way up, making it wide open. Then he bends the stem of the gate so that it cannot be lowered again (essentially sabotaging government property). Finally, he stuffs some banana trunks into the opening at the bottom of the gate. When the water pressure gets too great, the banana trunks will pop out, thereby saving the canal automatically!

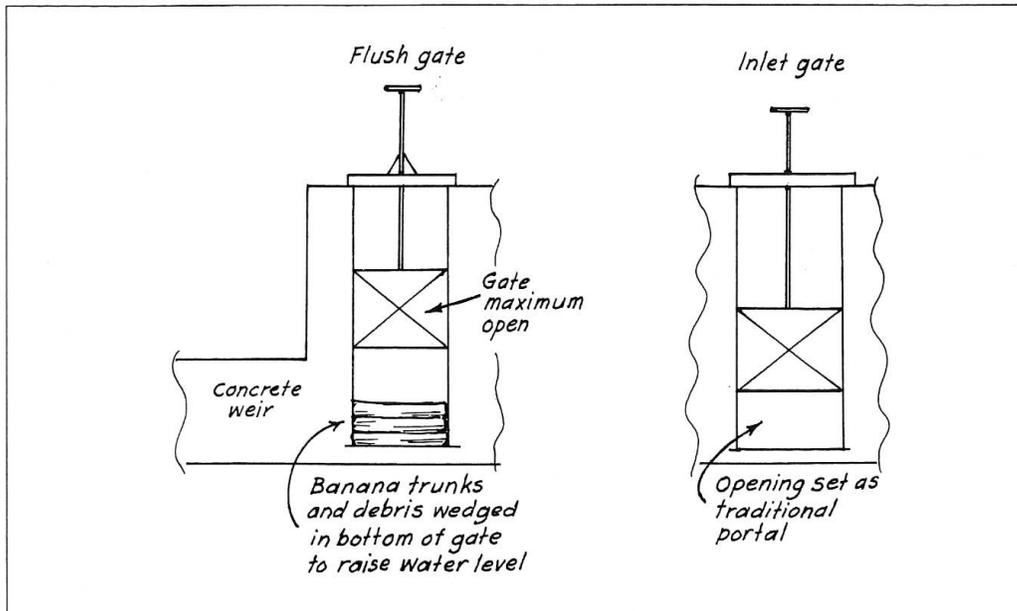


Figure 2. Common operational configuration of government-built diversion intake and scouring gates, West Sumatra, Indonesia. John Ambler. *A comparison of Farmer and engineer designed diversion weirs and intakes in West Sumatra and Indonesia*, in *Designing Irrigation Structures for Mountainous Environments*. IIMI. Colombo, Sri Lanka 1984. Pgs 46-51.

There is another problem, however: The concrete headworks themselves. This created an issue for *intersystem* water distribution, which had been governed by customary law. *Mintak aia sabatu* was no longer possible; there were no rocks to lift out. There was now a gatekeeper. But he was an employee of the Department of Public Works and was not accountable to the farmers. If farmers wanted to go upstream and ask for more water, this guy can't actually give them a yes or no. He reports to his superior, who's in the next sub-district, who may or may not give the downstream farmers any kind of relief. He had to prioritize the welfare of his 20 or so irrigation systems, not the larger group of 65 canals. Farmers alone could not solve this problem.

This government-managed system does irrigate more area than it used to, but there was no net gain. It was only robbing Peter to pay Paul. The systems lower down get less water and actually irrigate less area; the farmers now get their water from a different canal. In the lower systems, farmers who had been head-enders, and somewhat privileged, became tail-enders in the bigger system. Bigger systems are harder to manage, by definition, so the so-called improvements added management complexity. The upper improved system also in effect takes away labor from the lower systems, because farmers provide labor to the canals that provide them with water. So, they stopped providing labor for their old canal. This places a heavier burden on the remaining farmers in the lower canal, which is still the same length and still needs the same level of maintenance.

I saw a system in Sindhupalchok District in Nepal where it was a different kind of a situation. A lower canal was built, brand-new, and it began to irrigate some area that an upper canal had formerly irrigated. The farmers thus served now provided their labor to the new canal. Therefore, the upper canal didn't have enough labor anymore and it struggled. So, the relationship between the labor, the maintenance responsibility, and the supply of the water is really critical for determining what kind of an arrangement works.

The government in its statistics claims it increased irrigated area, but it never collected any information about the small systems downstream that were adversely affected. It increased area irrigated by the new government-sponsored system it ostensibly improved, but decreased the area irrigated by the traditional arrangements. Net increase in irrigated area: zero!

We were able to prove this by looking at large-scale (1:20,000) contour maps of West Sumatra that date from the 1880s. (I discovered these maps in the Echols collection on Southeast Asia at Cornell, where I was doing my Ph.D. Many of the maps Echols had the Japanese chop insignia on them, indicating that they had been confiscated from the Dutch when the Japanese invaded the Netherlands East Indies during World War II. But the collection was only partial. I assembled the complete set through the Koninklijk Insititut vor Taal, Land, en Volkkunde in the Netherlands (The Royal Dutch Institute for Language, Land and People in The Hague). The Indonesian Geological Survey did not even know this series existed. (Remember that story I told about living on the beach? Well, I remember one time these Australian soldiers were trotting across the beach in front of my shack. I asked, "What are you guys doing?" "We're doing some mapping, mate." Well, it turned out that 10 years later when I was back doing my own research there I realized that the reason they were doing that mapping was that they didn't know this whole series of 1:20,000 maps existed. Last year I had the whole set digitized and I distributed it to all the universities in the US with major Southeast Asia studies programs and major Indonesian institutions in West Sumatra. So, after more than 100 years, the complete set of maps returned to West Sumatra.)

We were able to compare the area irrigated for rice cultivation in 1888 to the similar area now, and the area was the same, despite all this government investment. Now as you might imagine, the irrigation engineers were notably unhappy when we briefed them on the results of this research. "What?! You are saying that all our hard work yielded no net increases in irrigated area? Prove it." We did, and that made them even unhappier. Intersystem water distribution is still a problem because of the government-built concrete weirs.

POSTSCRIPT: THE SMALL-SCALE IRRIGATION TURNOVER PROGRAM OF THE LATE 1980S.

The idea of this program was to take the small systems off the government's books and turn them over or back to the farmers. This was the first case of a relatively predatory, interventionist government actually giving some control back to the farmer citizens. The Public Works Department (PWD) agreed to the program because it also involved making some minor improvements to the systems before they were turned back to the farmers. These improvements were funded by the World Bank. I doubt the program would have proceeded without some construction money attached.

But at the end of the day, the PWD in West Sumatra lied. They did not formally take the systems off the books. They kept all the systems and the inflated figures for area irrigated in a second set of books which they used for internal budgeting processes within the Indonesian government, and continued to pull in operation and maintenance money based on those figures. What they told the World Bank about turnover was fabrication. What they told the rest of Indonesian government about area irrigated was also fabrication. For example, one system, Bdr. Tongah, was listed in the government registry as irrigating 35 hectares, while I know from detailed mapping of that system that actually it irrigates only 12 hectares! And the government had in fact made no investments in that system. The farmers did not even know that some of their systems were classified as "government systems." I only found out about the government keeping two sets of books by accident after talking to the *juru pengairan*, or water guide, in Lintau two or three years later.

LESSONS FOR OXFAM

Outsiders, and that includes outsiders even from the same country (and these irrigation engineers were essentially outsiders), have to be careful about making assumptions. Each situation can be different, and each requires asking detailed questions of local people.

Our scientific or technical training can sometimes lead us astray, especially if our formal training does not extend to cover the particular conditions we are confronted with in the field. And, the more remote the area, and the higher the percentage of people from minority or marginalized groups, the more likely you are to find technologies that do not look the same as the ones we're used to in more populous and accessible areas. (Using Ford Foundation grants, I was able to fund work on irrigation engineering in hilly environments, putting it on the engineering map in its own right.)

More sophisticated or higher cost technology does not necessarily mean more sophisticated in net terms; simple technologies can be operated in a sophisticated manner even if the hardware looks crude.

What may just appear to be a thing can actually be a part of a legal code, like the jumble of rocks described here was part of a water distribution system. Law and custom can be embedded in a technology, in ways that need investigation to understand.

You have to 'bound the system' properly. In this case, the real system was much bigger than an individual canal. The engineers thought there were about 20 canals along the river. But there were actually 65 canals along the 30 km stretch of river. The engineers were actually thinking too small, whereas, the system was quite large.

Requiring co-investment from farmers would have forced outsiders to ask farmers what they want and are willing to pay for. This would have brought down total costs and makes the interventions more socially appropriate, although less sophisticated from an engineering point of view.

P.S.: Just to give a plug for engineers, another, larger river, the Sinamar, also runs through Lintau, but it is at the bottom of a deep ravine and generally cannot be used for irrigation. Some small irrigation canals used to draw water from the river at a couple of points for limited irrigation. In these situations, the farmers had to construct a complicated wooden and rock tripod structure across a much bigger river, just to raise the water a little to irrigate the small areas of rice hemmed between the limestone ridges and the river. These weirs, called *alahan*, were difficult to construct and very time consuming to make. They also required cutting new trees for the timbering every time it washed out in a flood. This is a situation where a concrete weir would be appropriate because of the labor and cost of the traditional *alahan*, and because there was never a shortage of water compared to irrigable area, so *mintak aia sabatu* was not an issue. Here the *alahan* was just a diversion device, not also an inter-canal water distribution device. Whether a concrete headworks would have been justified for such a small irrigated area is another matter, but the technology would have been right.

Q & A PERIOD

John: Is there a way of making the traditional system more efficient without this particular type of investment? Yeah, it's so clear. And if you had asked the farmers what they wanted, they would have given you a clear answer. "Leave the headworks alone. Leave the pile of rocks just the way it is, because it's doing what it's supposed to do: the dual function of diverting water as well as dividing water. But give us some assistance with the main canal. Help us with canal lining, so we don't have as many losses." You get seepage losses, you get these

crabs that burrow through the side of the banks and spring leaks, and you get just general conveyance losses. That's where they would have wanted the money invested. In fact, you find in hill irrigation areas where the soil tends to be more porous than in flat clay areas, you get high seepage losses from the canals. But, again, the engineers are not trained to think that way; the engineers are trying to think from the headworks first on down and that was inhibiting a better solution. I asked farmers, "When the government first started this improvement program, did they ever come and ask you what you wanted?" They all answered, "No. No, they never did."

Q: "How does a change in technology affect management?"

John: "One of the things that we often find is that new technology usually comes with new management needs. That certainly happened in the case here: The technology was introduced from outside and new external management was introduced, as well. Whereas, if you had built on the traditional technology and improved it marginally by more strategic and more considered intervention, then you would have had a system that wouldn't have needed that extra external input. It wouldn't need new managers. It wouldn't need government-paid irrigation engineers."

Q: "I would politely push back on one element of that. Things like M-Pesa, which is a mobile-based banking-system, have dramatically changed the speed of remittances from city to countryside almost overnight. It has dramatically changed how funds flow within the Kenyan society in a breathtaking way. And I think the last piece about technology I would mention—and this is something that we need to get our heads around—is: Coming out of the Internet industry, what is the meaning of things that Twitter, Google Earth, and other information sources have given to people? What are the implications of that for our advocacy work? It is a much different way than how we have done things in the past."

John: "I think it's a really important point. Technology comes in many forms, and some of the information and knowledge management technology doesn't have any parallels in customary or traditional technology. It's brand new, and we're still devising new forms of social organization to manage it. I gave the example of the new seeds and bore-well technology in agriculture; those didn't build on traditional technology at all. Those were brand new and they needed new management systems and new local and statutory law to handle them."

Q: "Technology can do all sorts of things. But the most important thing to remember is what you said about how engineers build things because they can, not because they're necessarily the best solution. The best technology on Earth can be misused, because you're using it in the way that the engineer wants rather than in a way that would actually be useful. And all technologists have to be able to make the decision and say, 'I love this technology but, you know, it's not really right for this situation.' As long as you can do that, technology is incredibly powerful."

John: “That’s a really good point. And if we go back to one of the earlier seminars, where we talked about co-investment—if the engineers had come into the Lintau valley and said, ‘We’ve got some ideas about what might make sense to improve your irrigation systems, but you’re going to have to pay for them, or put up 50 percent or 25 percent,’ then that’s a good forcing function. Then farmers would have gotten the opportunity to say what they wanted to spend their money on and the investment choices would have been quite different. It would have been on the canal lining, not on the headworks.”

Q: “John, when the system was put in place, I’m wondering whether there was any attention paid to the governance of the use of the water. With the traditional governance system with the staff, etc., it was very needs-driven. So, my question is: With this system, where the control was outside of the farmers, was there an attempt to put in some kind of governance system for the use of the water?”

John: “No, there was no attempt to build an intersystem governance management system that would encompass all the canals. The government thought of each of those 20 canals it assisted as their canals, and they managed based on trying to optimize the performance of those individual 20 canals, not optimizing the performance of all 65. That’s why I said that the government was operating a system that was improperly bounded. They saw the limits of their system in very narrow terms, instead of thinking about the whole river system. The farmers were able to deal with the poorly designed gates by bending the stems and putting the banana trunks in the opening, but they couldn’t deal with the altered inter-canal distribution issue very easily.”

Q: “I was wondering if you think that, as development practitioners, governments, etc., we are learning from these examples of failed projects? Are we getting better from 25 years ago, or is it still the same thing?”

John: “This lesson is from 30 years ago, and I’m afraid that we can keep coming up with new and better examples of failure. Pick an area that you want, and the technology-led (as opposed to management- or operations-led) approach still tends to dominate. Where does most of the money reside when it comes to development? It’s in forestry departments, it’s in irrigation departments, and it’s in agriculture departments. And you’ve got to remember that people who are in those departments didn’t necessarily choose those departments because they wanted to work with people. The engineers wanted to work with water and concrete. The agronomists wanted to work with crops, not farmers. The forestry people wanted to work with trees, not people. And so there tends to be a very technically oriented approach to the way governments get involved in rural development.

“So, we continue to find lots of examples of this kind of failure. But it would really be interesting if there were some kind of magical way to understand if we’re getting better or not. I don’t have good data on that. But I do know is that there are cases where development has proceeded in a much smoother manner, and

most of those cases involve situations where people have to pay some portion of the investment. We continue to find lots of examples where the government is let off the hook because they do not engage farmers to any meaningful degree. These projects don't have a forcing function to be economically rational, or to be streamlined, cost-effective, or locally appropriate. The participatory rural appraisal movement has certainly helped many NGOs to ask better questions, but I have less confidence that governments are changing."

Q: "I've seen water pumps all over El Salvador that were great for a year but then broke. That's one of the other problems with technology: You can introduce the technology before you have the infrastructure to maintain it and to repair it. So then eventually, someone came into a lot of these communities with bicycle-driven pumps that people could fix themselves. They didn't have to rely on having a mechanic or parts. For example, USAID requires most of our aid equipment to come from the US, so then the parts would have to come from the US and they weren't available. That's often a problem, even if the technology itself might work really well.

"The other thing I was going to ask you concerns water rights. Did the old system really work for the people who were farthest downstream? Sometimes I think that those systems really work very well, but we also have to be careful not to romanticize the traditional systems and think that they're always equal and fair because obviously there's great power imbalances in those systems as well."

John: "That's a good question. Based on my conversations with farmers, it seems that under the old system, farmers were planting traditional varieties of seeds. Under the old system they were only growing one crop of rice a year and it grew for 180 days. So, they were growing the old crops and during the main part of the rainy season water is not too much of a problem. It's as you approach the latter part of the crop season where water becomes more difficult. According to discussions that I had with people who were downstream, this old system used to work pretty well. But now you introduce two new factors. The more modern varieties of rice would grow from 105 to 120 days. If you get two crops that's already 210 days, or more, you're spreading your call on water over an even larger number of months. So, the old system would have been stressed even without new irrigation investments. Now you get this new technology coming in from the government (the government technology came in just on the heels of the new rice varieties). So, both of those things disrupted the equity issue. We found that the government management systems, the government-invested systems, were capturing a disproportionate amount of the water; they were capturing almost all of the water during the latter half of the second cropping season.

Commenting on the ability to maintain, those pumps in El Salvador may have been limited, but in India the capacity is huge. A huge industry has built up around pump technology, pump maintenance, etc. Of course they have massive

economies of scale there, so it made a lot of sense to develop that industry quickly.”

“But no matter whether it’s a manufactured technology, like pumps or some other kind of simpler technology, the whole world is littered with examples of failed or non-maintained systems. And that’s actually one of the things that we probably need to spend more money on within our monitoring and evaluation and learning systems in Oxfam; going back to areas that we assisted five, 10 years ago and seeing what remains.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- When technology change occurs very quickly how does customary law respond?
- What steps would you take to ensure that customary law is considered in any program to “improve” the local technology?
- Is customary or local law growing up around entirely new technologies, like mobile banking, Internet access, and video streaming?
- How can technology alter the balance of power and benefit people living in poverty?



Siti Mastura makes packets of *abon ikan*, or fish floss (an ingredient for traditional Indonesian dishes), at her home in Lewoleba, Indonesia. *Rodrigo Ordonez / Oxfam*

6

What we know, what we think we know, and what we wish we knew: the role of research

PREFACE

In this session, I want to explore some topics on research. Oxfam is a big consumer of research, producer of research, and commissioner of research, and yet I'm not sure that we always use research as systematically as we should or as well as we should.

Let me start off with a quote by Charles Lerche, a political scientist who said: "There is no more vicious theorist than the person who says, 'I have no theory, I just let the facts speak for themselves.'" Reality is, in fact, tricky. Facts are not just facts; facts have to be interpreted through theoretical lenses to make sense for us. If we think that facts are just speaking for themselves, then we will certainly get into trouble, and we won't see it coming!

Another useful quote, this one from Mark Twain: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

To be a good consumer of data and interpreter of what's happening around us, we need to keep an open mind, and to be willing to subject what we "know for sure" to repeated reality tests. What we "know" may not be correct anymore, if it ever was. What we "know" may only apply in certain circumstances. The world is in rapid flux, and so we must keep an open mind to new interpretations of what we "know."

In talking about research issues, I'm drawing on: a couple of years of dissertation field work; 10 years of funding a lot of research through the Ford Foundation; two years of debates in the Social Science Research Council, where I was outnumbered by the postmodernists; and the work of the last 10 years working with action organizations using research. In this brief session, I'm trying to combine three courses: one on epistemology, one on research design, and one on research methods. But at no time during this trick will my fingers ever leave my hands. So this is going to be impossible, basically.

ON RESEARCH

The idea of scientific research, at least from a positivist point of view, is that it should be doing three things: helping us to understand phenomena, allowing us to predict phenomena based on that understanding, and ideally helping us to control or influence the phenomena based on our understanding of the mechanisms that we've uncovered. That's the dream; that's the rational choice science that we're familiar with. I don't know if it's a dream or a hallucination, because reality's pretty complex. When you get into thinking about actually controlling or influencing the course of events, that's a pretty bold statement. The postmodernists, on the other hand, say, "Oh, this is nonsense. You can't predict—much less really influence—human behavior. There are too many

feedback loops; there are too many discursive elements, too many multivariate elements of human behavior that we don't understand." But the trouble with the postmodernists' approach, which intuitively I appreciate, is that you're paralyzed. Read some postmodernist literature, and you're saying, "Okay, so what am I supposed to do as an action organization with this information?" And it's usually pretty hard to figure out how you would intervene because everything is so complex, so discursive, and interpenetrating. You've got brilliant people like Ben Anderson at Cornell talking about "imagined communities." But I have trouble dealing with the "imagined community" and still work in an action organization.

At Oxfam we tend to take a more positive point of view, trying to make our programs actionable. I think our main challenge is to avoid oversimplification, and also to not fall into the over-complexification trap either. That's a pretty circumscribed zone. But we definitely need research, and I think we under-invest in research in general. The field is littered with development projects that were not guided by good research and good theory. Projects that failed for one or the other reason; projects that seemed good at the time, but you go back a few years later and there's no evidence of the project ever having been there; projects that had all kinds of unintended consequences. Those are things that we should be able to have better control. We should be able to reduce some of that set of problems by doing good research. But research requires rigor. It's not just a set of casual journalistic conversations, although that may be part of a suite of research methods. Social science research methods have been developed for a particular reason. They've been developed to try to systematically avoid bias. Bias is your enemy, right? Repeat after me: "Bias is my enemy!" Usually with the type of work that we do, some kind of combination of mixed methods is important—some kind of quantitative methodology, some kind of qualitative methodology. We oftentimes need to have a mixed-disciplinary perspective. Rural people—damn them—don't live in sectors, do they?! They have complex, multifaceted lives, just as we do. We need to think about the different perspectives that academic disciplines bring to understanding human behavior and which of those would be valuable for us as researchers. I think, in particular, we are weak at Oxfam America (and Oxfam in general) in economic analysis. We could be stronger in this regard.

Research needs to be informed by refutable hypotheses. Research that is only project-justification research is not real research. Let me give you an example. I was working with the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, and once the director said, "You know, this research on urban issues is really fascinating. I mean, it's just opening up a whole new world for us." "How so?" I pursued. He said, "We don't know the answer to this Ford Foundation-funded research." He continued, "The Party has always told us what the new policy was, and then told us what research findings to find, and we've always obeyed. Now, we're doing something where we don't know what the answer is going to be until the research is done." We can laugh, but believe me:

Some of our Oxfam dogma can be just as pre-cooked. Sometimes in our zeal for fighting for justice, we tend to assume we know more than we really do. I think of the Make Trade Fair work that we did. Some of the numbers that we were coming up with, about how much the US subsidies of crops were depressing world prices for commodities, were crazy. We were quoting figures like 25 percent or 30 percent. That clearly couldn't have been right. It had to be somewhere around 5 percent, 7 percent, 10 percent. But we get caught up in the zeal of the issue, and I think we suffered from grade inflation in our findings.

Our research should be rigorous, but we know it is a political act. Anything you do at scale, or attempts to influence systems at scale, is a political act. We should try to make our research as unassailable as possible. But we have to recognize that it's going to be a political act, and when you get into the realm of politics, facts aren't necessarily facts. I have a couple of friends, one who works for Congressional Research Service in Washington, DC, and one works for USAID. They were saying that in Washington now people almost believe that if you say something enough times it becomes true, no matter how close or far away from reality it may be. If you say it enough times, it becomes truth. That's a political act. Republicans have said that Obama has taken away the work requirement for welfare. Independent fact checkers have pointed out that this is not true. It's a federally mandated requirement that the work be still part of the deal. But if you say it enough times, people believe it and start to take it as fact. That's the type of thing that we have to be prepared for when using our own research. It can be twisted and it will be used in political ways. All big systems have large vested interests behind them and we need to be ready for reaction against our research.

Research can be expensive, as well. The Gates Foundation-supported Saving for Change research will cost on the order of \$2 million. This on top of the \$10 million Gates gave Catholic Relief Service, CARE, and us. Gates put all the research money in one bucket because they trusted Oxfam and they wanted consistency in research design and analysis. The research includes both detailed anthropological research and random controlled trials. I think that when this material comes out, it's going to be a major contribution for the whole field and for development research more generally. Research can be expensive, but not spending the money is just like building a fleet of boats without rudders, as far as I'm concerned. They can go off-course so easily.

If you get a chance to do research yourself, I recommend that you take it. It takes you inside a world that's not accessible to bureaucrats, not accessible to technicians and not accessible to windshield experts. It gives you street cred ("When I was in the village..."); there's a certain gravitas to that. But most importantly, it will spice up your memoirs! Long-term research is even rarer, and as we develop research alliances and relationships with different organizations, you'd be surprised at how few people have actually done long-term research. A lot of people have only done short-term studies—one-month, two-month, three-

month consultancy-type studies. It would be interesting if we asked some of our counterpart university researchers in our different countries, “What long-term research have you done? Have you lived in a village?” My bet is that many of them have not. I’m not trying to say that living in a village is absolutely necessary to be a good researcher, but it does help you develop your garbage antenna. My antennae start quivering when I hear stuff that just doesn’t jive with my experience in the village. That doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily wrong, just that when the antennae start quivering you have to ask deeper questions. I find that my antennae start quivering more vigorously when I’m with people from the World Bank, the IMF—people who are very removed from village environments, people who have oftentimes only operated in capital cities. It’s not that they’re bad people or bad analysts; it’s just that usually they’ve not been exposed to the rhythms of villages and how systems work at that level. And I think especially that they have not been exposed in a direct way to systems under stress. I had an engineering professor who once said, “If you want to understand how a system really operates, observe it under stress.” That’s when the mechanisms that are sometimes latent or hidden come out. Those mechanisms should be part of our power analysis. We place a lot of emphasis on power analysis, but if we haven’t observed a system under stress, we may not be seeing the important mechanisms exert themselves or exhibit themselves. Stress reveals the hidden workings of power that we need to know about.

Even if you don’t have the chance to do long-term research, you can still be a good consumer of long-term research. For example, I’m impressed by the type of stuff that Chris [Hufstader] reads, some of which he’s passed my way. Things by Yale anthropologist James Scott, for example He dives into issues in a long-term way. Scott wrote an important book called *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, talking about the ways communities get around elite structures, and subvert them, bypass them, or avoid them. The book that Chris lent me was about how communities try to maintain themselves under the radar screen of bureaucracy. Oxfam’s orientation literature claims, “People should demand that governments fulfill their responsibilities.” Well, James Scott is saying that communities don’t trust government. When government gets involved they get interventionist, not helpful. It’s better to be under the radar screen than to have government take too much of an interest in you. It’s another perspective, but those are the types of debates that we should be having in Oxfam.

When you’re reading any literature, you should be asking yourself, “What’s the underlying hypothesis here?” If you can’t find an underlying hypothesis, it could be problematic. It could be that you’re thinking that you’re just collecting facts. But that’s a dangerous position. We must be self-aware, as we think about our power analysis. The power analysis is where we actually have to employ these skills in doing research, in developing our program strategies, and in advocating for our programs versus other Oxfam programs or other kinds of programs.

Because of the new One Oxfam approach, we have to be more aggressive in defending the logic of our own programs. That means we have to be able to articulate why we're doing what we're doing, what power relationships we're trying to address, and why we've chosen particular intervention points and not others. So, we have to do good research on that.

In a way, doing a power analysis is a little bit like an Asian fish trap; it starts small, gets wider, then gets narrower again. We start with a particular sphere of influence that we think is important to understand, a certain set of issues. And then being good social critics we say, "But this is connected to that, and that's connected to such and such, and such and such is connected to the other thing," and pretty soon the scope of our inquiry can get pretty large. If we're bad social scientists, we stop there and then we're paralyzed, because everything seems to be connected to everything else, and we don't know what's important and what's not. But if we're doing our job well as researchers and analysts, we say, "Okay, I'm pretty confident that now I understand what the boundaries are of the thing I am concerned with. Within those boundaries, I then identify x, y, and z as the major things to focus on. It's not everything and it's not nothing. It may be a little wider than you started out with, because you learned that other considerations were important, too, as you've gone along. But it's not everything.

Well, I have lots of comments on doing research, but just a couple things that I think are of more general importance for everybody. I think you should give yourself about twice as long for the analysis as you thought you were going to need. So many research projects (probably including our own) start off with a very ambitious goal of collecting data. They collect enormous amounts of data. You can make a career out of looking at the data sets of other projects that have never been analyzed. There's lots of material out there that's never been analyzed; it's been collected and never sifted through or systematized at all. Actual analysis takes a lot longer than people budget for.

One of the things that I found was that I took a long time to actually settle on my field research site. It took me about four months of travelling around looking at different sites to try to find something that fit my requirements. I've talked a little bit about this before: I looked at a valley 30 kilometers long and the 65 irrigation systems that drew water from the Tampo River in that valley. I had a problem in selecting my research site because a lot of areas in West Sumatra are too wet; irrigation was not a limiting factor. And I didn't want to do a study just on one irrigation system; I wanted to look at the interconnection between irrigation systems. So it took me a while to find a place where rainfall was lower, and where you had inter-connected irrigation systems.

To do good research, you've got to develop credibility as a foreigner. I had been in West Sumatra in 1975 as a 22-year-old, and it's a matrilineal society. Who's the lowest on the totem pole in a matrilineal society? Young, unmarried males. I was the young, unmarried male and I didn't have a car—I didn't even have a motorcycle. I would walk along the street, and people would jeer and yell things

at me. I come back nine years later and I have a car, I'm the head of a research team that includes two university professors, I have two daughters (daughters are good in matrilineal society!), and I'm nine years older with that much less hair. People in West Sumatra associate baldness with great age. This part of developing credibility you can't plan! I would go to the remotest villages in this valley (there were over 80 villages, and I went to all of them), and people would say, "Oh, this is Gwen's father!" They already knew by reputation my daughter who was in preschool in a village 15 kilometers away. Her reputation preceded mine, so I built on hers.

Sometimes things happen that you can't plan. I was four hours from the capital city, Padang, and I was driving back to Padang one time, and a bus accident happened right in front of me. I think eight people were killed; it was a mess. I took one guy who had a badly gashed leg to the hospital. It turned out that he was from the village next to mine way back in Lintau. He was connected to the family of the people who owned the house that I was living in. That helped my credibility, too. You can't predict those types of things.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OXFAM

Again, we really need to look at our power analysis. When we started doing power analysis for the Program Strategy Papers, it was hard. In the first iteration, there was no power analysis. After much prodding, we just got a list of actors that might be important. There was no attempt at analyzing their relationship or what that meant for our programming. Finally, after even more prodding, goading, and pleading, we got people to start to think, "Alright, let's describe the network of relationships, describe the power flows, and describe who's important and who's not." And you started to use that as something to guide our interventions. We have to know why the actors are doing what they're doing, to be able to design programs.

In our research and power analysis we focus a lot on elites, as we should. But we tend to think about elites as static. "Elites think and do this, therefore we will counter with this." Well, elites are elites; they know how to adapt, they know how to change their tactics, they know how to use new weapons, they know how to avoid and coerce, and they know how to publicize or to hide things. Remember how I talked about the goal of social science research as understanding, prediction, and control? Predicting how elites are going to act is not easy. Just getting to the prediction stage would be a great boon to us. "What are the elites going to do?" Like a chess game, "If we do this, what are the elites going to do?" I still think we're a little weak on that level of anticipation. This is one of the reasons that I've been promoting some kind of information collection mechanism that accompanies our major programs. It may be monitoring or learning, or process documentation research. It doesn't matter exactly what it's called, but we

need a research window into the dynamics that are unfolding as we move along through a program. The knowledge we gain through this research will guide how we adapt or reframe some of our activities.

We also need to establish more formal and stronger alliances or cooperation agreements with research organizations, or organizations that have some good research capability. As Oxfam members, we're actually not researchers. Most of us can be good consumers of research, but we're not researchers ourselves. I think we sometimes mistake good journalistic reporting for research. We need to develop alliances and arrangements with organizations that have that capability. In reading the Oxfam research, we're not writing for an academic audience, so we don't hold ourselves to academic standards. But I think we have to remember that the ostensible research that we present is oftentimes indicative rather than definitive. That doesn't mean it's bad research; it just means that it's holding itself to a certain standard that's appropriate for most of the work that we do. But it's not going to get published in the *American Journal of Economics* or the *American Journal of Sociology*, which is a good thing because if it was published there it would all be statistics and we wouldn't be able to understand it! We'd all be talking about Durbin-Watson coefficients and things like that. In fact, that's actually one of the big criticisms of some of the research that you find in the social sciences. It's tried so hard to imitate economics, or physics, or engineering, that it's become heavily dependent on advanced statistics. The more reliant you get on these statistical gymnastics, the less interesting the questions are that you ask, because you're narrowing the research questions so tightly to try to get at something that will produce statistical significance.

I think much of the anthropological research that's out there could be valuable for us in Oxfam. For me, anthropology seems to be more accessible than sociology for the social phenomena we care about. We all probably have the idea that social forces are complex, but they're not so complex that we can't deal with them in one way or another. We have a basic premise that we can actually intervene and make a difference, which means that we need to understand enough about those social forces to be able to choose the proper intervention points. We need to have a research methodology that's robust enough to help us get at those social forces, too, to be able to plan our work.

We do have to have a fairly high tolerance for ambiguity, and for thinking of some of these research studies as indicative rather than definitive, and also as time-bound rather than perpetual. The more dynamic the situation we find ourselves in—the more active the social forces are that we're trying to study—the more likely the situation is to change, and the more likely that our research findings, however rigorous they were to begin with, are going to be out of date fairly soon.

Again, as a consumer of research, we need to avoid over-extrapolation. What's found in one valley or one country may not be valid in the next valley or the next country. Avoid projection; when one group claims to speak for another, then that needs to be probed. For example, United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) had a program for piping water to villages in northern Pakistan. The program seemed to work very well. The only trouble was that the UNDP only talked to the men, and fetching the water was the only opportunity the women had to get out of the house—to get out from behind those mud walls and talk about things important to them. The water project took away the one opportunity they had for getting out.

Avoid the time-warp delusion; what was found in the past may not hold today, or what purportedly happened in the past may have been idealized or fictionalized. We should always ask ourselves, “Is there a bias here? What kind of bias might be operating in this research that I’m looking at?” One really interesting example I read about from participatory rural appraisal techniques. A group of NGO staff were doing village mapping. They started with the men, and the men put the houses, the roads, and the fields on, but they forgot the water sources because it was the women who were primarily involved in collecting the water. When they asked the women, the water sources (the wells, etc.) finally got put on. What do you think they found when at last they asked the children? The pastures! The children were the goatherds and the cow-tenders. Those had been left off by the adults entirely. This kind of bias can appear anywhere and we must be alert.

One other thing in the research area: You know how reports within government agencies, and probably within UNDP and other big agencies as well, the field evaluator writes a terrible report. He says, in effect, “This project stinks.” At the next level: “This project doesn’t stink too badly.” It gets edited as it goes up: “This project is odorless.” Then, “This project smells okay.” By the time it gets to the Director General, the project smells pretty sweet. But the report may not have much to do with what was actually found in the field.

Finally, ask yourself, did that research explore plausible rival hypotheses? Did it deal with other things that could have explained what was found, other examples?

Research is difficult. To be a good consumer or connoisseur of research, sometimes you have to know statistics, sometimes you have to know theory pretty well, or both. You oftentimes have to be familiar with the concepts of the discipline. But you basically have to be inquisitive and take things with a grain of salt; because why people do what they do is never simple.

I just want to close with something my friend and colleague from Volunteers in Asia days Larry Fisher, who later did a lot of work at Cornell with integrated pest management, wrote:

“Economists, agronomists, and planters as of late
Have discovered a new way to pontificate.
Beyond your jargon like ‘Success Enhancement,’
‘Integrated Development,’ and ‘Rural Advancement.’

Working in all their infinite wisdom,
They're trying to define a 'Farming System.'
To answer the question for all of you,
'Why do farmers do what they do?'
At universities and experiment stations 'round the globe,
In offices, labs, and on farms they probe.
Through consultancy surveys in developing nations,
Upstream and downstream experimentations.
With yield rates, inputs, and multiple regressions,
Attempting to explain the profoundest of questions.
With the diverse hypothesis that each eschew,
On why farmers do what they do.
Variability and generalization,
Indigenous knowledge and maximization.
The issues discussed, the factors controlled,
Computers click, theories unfold.
Papers get published, conferences convened.
Projects are funded; it becomes obscene
When predictably they conclude in final review
That a more generous grant might give them a clue
As to why farmers do what they do.
Somewhere farmers plow and plant,
Milk their cows, work and chant.
After the interviews, trials, and calculations,
The experts retire to their research stations.
And the farmers continue to grow their corn
While old women die and children are born.
The men swap stories and drink their brew,
And scratch their heads and wonder anew,
'Why do scientists do what they do?'"

Q & A PERIOD

Q: “About your point on power analysis, I have two questions for you. One was: What do you think is the best one that we have, that we’re currently using in our programs? The second question was: I’ve been involved in the Oxfam International Strategic Planning process and I recognize that having a theory of change for a strategy is a challenge in and of itself. But what I find in reading those documents is that we’ve used the same crutch over and over again, which is that the theory of change is that if you empower people they can hold their duty-bearers accountable and therefore get what they need. That’s the underlying kernel I see over and over again, and it’s increasingly unexamined. It’s almost an excuse for real thinking about what that might look like or what that might mean in a specific situation or for a specific issue.”

John: “I think both of those are important issues. I think our Extractive Industries work has elements of the best power analysis that we’ve done. I’m not sure it’s always been written down. Some of it’s been written down, but I know that the thinking that Javier Aroca in Peru and Solinn Lim in Cambodia have been doing illustrates a pretty sophisticated understanding of the actors. But it’s not always on paper as clearly as it could be...” We need to be better consumers of solid research that will help inform our power analysis because, if we don’t, we’re liable to become dogmatic in a way that’s divorced from reality.. As we struggle through the process of developing the OI Strategic Plan, I came across things like, ‘Demand that government allocate more resources for basic essential services,’ or something like that—” “So where’s the theory behind this? What theory are we drawing on when we say things like that? If there isn’t a theory, then it’s opinion rather than a practical action point of view. It doesn’t mean that we have to give up our ethics and our values. We want to keep those. We believe that government has responsibilities. We believe people have rights, and that there’s a relationship between those. But what are the intervening mechanisms whereby people can exercise their rights and where government can fulfill its responsibilities? Well, it’s not just something as simple as people demanding their rights. For example, you can’t demand your rights in the same way in Myanmar as you can in India. The power dynamics are different; the consequences of getting it wrong are severe in a place like Myanmar. So, we have to be attentive to that difference in context, the different social forces that are at work, and also the different risks that are associated with different types of interventions.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Give some examples of simplified hypotheses that Oxfam might pursue as a research topic.
- In your experience, what disciplines are Oxfam staff weakest in? Strongest in?
- What are the biggest challenges in putting together mixed-method research?



Indigenous people march on Human Rights Day in Cambodia. *Savann Oeurn / Oxfam America*

7

Relations with local civil society: new roles for INGOs

PREFACE

This is the seventh of the seminars we've had. This one is less about personal experiences. I may mention things from my professional work, but it's a lot more about Oxfam and its relationship to civil society, and how we think about ourselves going forward. Ray Offenheiser has talked about us aspiring to be a 21st-century networked NGO. That language has caught on within Oxfam International, but we've never discussed what that means. What does it mean to be networked? What does it mean to be an NGO, actually? And what does it mean to be 21st-century? I'll touch on all three of those dimensions in this talk.

At the core of our business model is working with other NGOs, but how do we, under this vision of being a 21st-century networked NGO, actually work with other NGOs? Are we just a grant maker? Are we a capacity builder? Are we an agenda supporter? Do we convene in some sense? Do we broker ideas? Do we facilitate actors to get together? This is actually up for debate within Oxfam International—what roles we want to play.

WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

First, let me mention a couple of ideas about how we think about civil society. There's a *technical perspective*: Civil society is composed of volunteer organizations and initiatives outside the domain of the state, the market, or the individual and family level. It's anything that's not corporate, market, state, or family. There's what's sometimes called a *moral perspective*, and that orientation situates civil society as the collective efforts of associations to provide a decent society and a rudder for the future of society. It values things like trust, cooperation, and solidarity. There's another perspective, which some people call the *emancipatory perspective*. Here, civil society refers to a public space where citizens meet to discuss and negotiate a common public interest. It's in this virtual space where people try to decide where society is headed, where it should go, and what we are going to do about it.

Oxfam supports all three of these perspectives. We often see civil society's primary role as offering a platform for citizens to organize themselves outside of the state, the corporate sector, and family to—as the emancipatory perspective suggests—further common interests and values, develop opinions and ideas, and debate society's future direction. As a result of that, we see civil society getting involved in a variety of things. Creating the conditions for inclusive democracy is one of the things civil society works on. Also, providing watchdog functions over those in positions of power, presenting policy alternatives, sometimes providing services directly but not letting duty bearers off the hook, pressing duty bearers to fulfill their obligation to protect and promote human

rights, and acting as some kind of intermediary for social participation. In Oxfam International language, we refer to this as *active citizenship*.

With that kind of an agenda, if that's what we mean by *civil society*, you can see why governments are sometimes very wary of us. Governments would like a monopoly on developing ideas and opinions about the framing of society's future directions. Authoritarian leaders want to keep it all in their own hands. That's why space for civil society is so limited in many places. Civil society has such a broad, all-encompassing, and intrusive agenda. Space for civil society is not just an issue in places like Myanmar or North Korea. It's also an issue in countries like India or the Philippines, where society is relatively open and where there's a lot of space for NGOs. But the latitude given NGOs is contracting. According to Penny Lawrence of OGB, we've seen some 90 countries in the past five years that have put in place some kind of regulation that restricts civil society in one way or another. That includes many liberal democracies. Civil society is inherently threatening to people in power—as it should be—and we want to support that threat.

OXFAM'S ROLE IN CIVIL SOCIETY

What does this mean for Oxfam now, in particular? We've got a couple of reasons why need to examine this relationship with civil society a little more carefully. One is that we want to work together as One Oxfam and we want to have One Programme Approach. This One Programme Approach refers to merging of advocacy, long-term development programming, and humanitarian work. It's hard enough to get that together, but trying to get it together across 17 affiliates is another challenge altogether, so we need to be thinking about how we work to get a One Programme Approach going. We need to have some agreement on how to get larger scale and bigger impact in our programming. Since we work primarily with non-governmental organizations, the discussion about how we work with them has got to be part of our debate.

In Oxfam, there are several versions of what our "proper" role is vis-à-vis civil society. I put "proper" in quotation marks because this is hotly debated. One version views Oxfam as not part of local civil society. Let's set aside Oxfam India and Oxfam Hong Kong for a minute, which might be more properly considered part of civil society because legally they are local organizations in those countries. (They're incorporated and "grew up," as it were, in those countries.) But for the rest of Oxfam, this version goes, "Well, we're not part of civil society. We're outside of it; we should be in the background and should essentially go with the agenda of bona fide civil society—make grants to them and help them carry out their works." If you're a small Oxfam and you believe this, then you make small grants. If you're a big Oxfam and you believe this, you make large grants to strong organizations and strong networks. If you're making small

grants, you usually get involved in some kind of accompaniment or capacity building of some sort.

Another version of civil society and Oxfam's relationship to it says, "Okay, we may play the facilitator in the background, but we also can go beyond that. We can play special roles in convening people and organizations that otherwise might not get together. We can sometimes get involved in advocacy issues at the national level that we may have been reluctant to get involved in in the past. We may try to expand the space for NGOs to participate in their society." Being an international organization, we sometimes have more restrictions than local organizations, and sometimes fewer restrictions. This is something that has to be worked out case-by-case. This second version posits that there may be roles for Oxfam more in the advocacy, brokering, convening, idea-generation, lobbying, etc. That second agenda also looks at Oxfam as a source of knowledge about experiences in other countries, and thereby a source of comparative knowledge. Oxfam may be what some people call an "intermediary, defender, and lender of international profile" for local civil society. This is partly a witnessing function; as an international NGO is on the ground, it's performing some witnessing functions and simultaneously helping to legitimize the witnessing function itself. By its very presence, it helps open space for local civil society. This more activist version of Oxfam's relationship with local civil society also envisions, where it's politically possible, Oxfam as an amplifier of some of the concerns of local civil society. You know where the word "advocacy" comes from: It comes from the Latin *ad vox*, "to amplify the voice of." Sometimes Oxfam can be that amplifier.

This second version appeals to many people thinking about Oxfam's next Strategic Plan. But what does it imply? It implies that we're making choices. Actually, we're making choices under both models. In the grant maker, passive supportive model, we're making choices there as well. We're choosing to support some organizations and not others. Those organizations have certain capacities and ideologies that we're choosing to support, and we're not choosing other ones. This is a conscious choice.

This more activist conception of Oxfam's role really thrusts us into the middle of the maelstrom. We're right there on the ground, dealing with competing demands on our time from some organizations that we're going to have to say no to. And even organizations with whom you want to work present several options of ways in which you could collaborate. For example, you could be an ally when you're not funding them; they could be a partner where you are giving them funds. They could be a political bedfellow for the night.

There are lots of different roles that those organizations could play, and we as Oxfam have to think consciously about what relationship we want to cultivate. This brings up the issue of the staff that we have. If we're going to be working more in the policy level, and in brokering, convening, and idea-generating at the national level, we need staff who have that capability. Service provision probably does not prepare people very well for this kind of position. There's nothing wrong

with service provision, but it's just one dimension of the work that Oxfam does. It would be interesting to look at how much money we spend on things that are considered service provision throughout the whole federation. It may actually not be going down as much as we think. There's been some backlash among donors about funding things that are more advocacy-related. But we want to be in the more activist, advocacy-related arena, so we need to have a staff with advocacy and influencing skills. In some countries, local civil society is more advanced than we in the global North are, and we should be building *their* capacity. In fact, maybe we should be paying them to build our capacity!

Here, I'll tell a story about myself. My second posting when I lived overseas was in India. I'd spent eight years in different roles in Indonesia up to that point. I'd been a volunteer English teacher, I'd done my dissertation field work there, I'd worked in a non-governmental organization, and I had been a program officer for Ford Foundation, all in Indonesia. I thought I knew something about rural society and rural life. Then I went with Ford to India, and India just blew it all away. India was so different; there was so much variety there. The organizations in India were so much stronger than they were in Indonesia. I decided that I would spend the first two years of my work in India basically learning from Indian organizations. Even today my closest development friends are from Indian organizations. I had a professor at Cornell, Randy Barker, an agricultural economist who worked for a long time with the International Rice Research Institute. He said, "The best agronomists at IRRI were those who took two years to get their knowledge up to the levels of the farmers." Then, they were in a position to go beyond. But during those first two years, they learned what the farmers' objectives were, what their constraints were, what their techniques were, and all about local environmental conditions. That's the approach I took in working with organizations in India. I think it paid off.

So, we need to think seriously about the local capacity of civil society, especially in advocacy roles. Oxfam may have more technical knowledge in some cases; but local civil society almost always has more political knowledge and a better understanding of the way political systems work, of how to get things done, and of pitfalls to avoid. For us to be more credible in an activist, advocacy role, we actually need a credible track record in the country, too. We need good people but, as an organization, we have to have shown results. Nobody wants to partner with an organization that's an unknown quantity, especially in advocacy and politically sensitive things. If you make the wrong step there you could be ostracized. The money that we might bring to the table is not enough to get people to work with us if we don't know what we're doing.

We need to trust the local civil society, but at the same time we need to challenge it because, even in our imperfect state, there are sometimes things we know that local civil society may not know. There are relationships, alliances, and groupings that we can sometimes see that are not immediately obvious to organizations who have been working in their own cubicle for a long time. In

working with local civil society, we want to step back as soon as we can from any kind of direct services roles. We want the government to be able to step up to the plate there. That goes without saying, but you would be surprised at how much direct service delivery we actually still support as Oxfam International.

THE WAY FORWARD

In Oxfam now there's a lot of attention now to WIN, the Worldwide Influencing Network. The Worldwide Influencing Network envisions Oxfam as playing more influential roles at the national level than we have in the past. Why should we focus on the national level? Because that's where most of the resources are, and most of the creation of legal products. Who's making the laws? For the same reason we get interested in laws and policies, and implementation of policies, in America, we have gotten increasingly interested in those same dimensions in the countries we work in. We're trying to get better scale, because if we go village by village, well by well, irrigation system by irrigation system, company by company, we're not going to be able to catalyze enough resources to make a dent in poverty. Advocacy and influencing roles may help us break through to larger-scale efforts.

This is quite consistent with the activist version of our relationship with local civil society. But, again, it requires high skill sets among our staff. It requires a sharper distinction between short-term political bedfellows and long-term allies. The partners we traditionally fund may be moving into new roles. Not to pick on any particular program, but I think that in the Indigenous Peoples work in South America we need to think about some of our partners as moving into new roles. Sometimes we need to work with people we haven't worked with before. If we're trying to influence the government, we can't just work with civil society; we have to work with government, too. It sounds obvious, but we need to apply the same participatory development principles that we have for civil society with actors like the government. Yet, NGOs often do silly, stupid things like build demonstration projects and never involve the government in them until they're completed. Then the NGO says, "Hey come look at this. Why don't you guys adopt this?" We would never do that with a poor community; we would involve them in co-design, co-creation, and co-investment (see Seminar #2). If we don't do that with the government, why would we expect the government to somehow feel ownership over it? They won't. Typically, many of those pilot projects stand as isolated experiments that no one learns from or adopts.

If we're helping to put civil society more in touch with big actors like the government, we need to think about how to structure that relationship so that civil society and government are not David against Goliath. One way to help balance the scales is to bring in other actors like research organizations (national or international level) and other civil society organizations. If you can incorporate

them into larger working groups that seek to move forward on a common issue, then you start to get some balance of power. If you want to work with government, you sometimes actually have to fund government a little bit. For example, you'd be surprised how key staff in some agencies that you want involved in your agriculture, forestry, or water program don't have any travel budget. They don't have any funds to get out to the field to look at things. Sometimes you have to build in money, either through a direct grant to the government or through some other mechanism, to actually help people get out to the field to see what you're talking about.

You may need to help those civil society organizations to understand the language of government, too. In the late 1980s, we had a working group of agencies that were trying to develop more participatory forms of irrigation management in Indonesia, and at the beginning it was David and Goliath. Here, you had the huge and powerful Indonesian Irrigation Department, and then you had these little NGOs. Those NGOs didn't speak the language of the engineers; they didn't know the technical terms and concepts. So, we had to think about how we were going to get them the technical knowledge they needed. They did not need to become irrigation engineers, but they needed to be able to understand what the irrigation engineers were talking about.

As we think about our global advocacy networks, if we're getting involved more at the national level it means that we need to be able to facilitate inclusion of some of those national actors in the global debate. We can be an avenue for that; we can be a channel to help those debates happen. We can help some civil society organizations in Malawi, Bolivia, or Burundi. We can help them participate in international debates if we structure it correctly. It means that we have to be very careful not to think of our relationship as extractive, where we pull knowledge from them and we translate it for the rest of the world to understand. Where we can, we should provide direct access for those people to international fora, in ways that may not have been possible in the past. This is another type of skill; you don't just say, "Okay, NGO from Burundi. There's an international conference coming up. I'm going to give you an air ticket to send two people." It doesn't work that way. You have to work intensively with them to help them be part of, and influential in, the agenda setting. And helping them prepare their experiences in a way that is appropriate for each forum is critical.

Usually, when you've got a research institution, you've got educated Ph.D-types. Those are people who are often respected, begrudgingly sometimes, by the technical agencies. In my experience, what they find in the field almost always bears out what the NGOs have been saying all along. Having serious research back up the NGO gives them legitimacy, and they cannot be easily dismissed by the technical agency. These are some of the considerations we need to think about as we design our programs for greater impact, and as we design activities that will be carried out by local civil society, not by Oxfam.

I'm going to stop here. What does this imply about the types of discussions we may need to have among the Oxfam affiliates at country level? What does this imply about the types of people we hire? What does it imply about the way we view grant making at the country level? These are a few of the many questions that are in my mind, and that I'm sure you have. Let's open it up for questions.

Q & A PERIOD

Q: "I was wondering if we could look at a few examples of some things that Oxfam America's doing, and if you could help us see how you would apply your framework and what model they might fit into.

John: There are some Oxfams that believe that you basically stand back; that local civil society knows what it wants to do and you just support their agenda. In the extreme form, that means basically sending grants out to the organizations and not trying to engage too much in the discussion about the agenda. At the other extreme, some Oxfams are much more activist, trying to broker things, facilitate things, muckrake, stimulate, and trying to put together new alliances, even if they're short-term. That's much more where I see our Extractive Industries work; it's got a lot of the hallmarks of this more activist type of programming. It is David against Goliath in many cases. There are many powerful actors involved. In the countries that we're working in on extractive industries, like Ghana, Senegal, Cambodia, Bolivia, Peru, and El Salvador, the conditions are all different. But the forces that are trying to exert their power are strong, and you have to devise clever ways to influence them, to embarrass them or nudge them along toward more equitable and safer business practices. We do it through protests, research, standard-setting, and in trying to get companies in countries to buy into the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. But it's painstaking, and some of the most important activities occur, essentially, below the radar screen; you don't see much happening. Sometimes, when policy gets changed or implementing regulation gets forged, it seems to just appear out of the blue. Well, it didn't appear out of the blue; we oftentimes had an influence in contributing to its formation. But, tactics may be different from country to country. And our program is now getting a lot of attention within OI. People in Kenya, Sierra Leone, and in Liberia, for example, all want help with Extractive Industries. What's interesting to me about the Gender Violence program [in El Salvador]—and that's one of my favorite programs, actually—is that we can pull it off because our Program Officer, Melida Guevara, is amazing; she's an intellectual force in the field herself, and acknowledged as such. That gives her the legitimacy to be able to start brokering agreements and to pull actors together who otherwise would not work together. She's funded a training course on gender violence and gender awareness that has participants from the police force, the municipalities, the research community, the NGOs, and even bus

drivers. She's got the credibility to work with all of these organizations. Is it controversial? Yes—we've been wrestling with some of our other Oxfams in El Salvador about this very program. But a recent evaluation of the program showed that our approach was very effective. But because it's very activist, you've got to have the right personnel to be able to lead it."

Q: "John, if we look to the future to build new and greater alliances for making change, I wonder what are some of the lessons from the past that we can take with us in selecting the alliances and the bedfellows we need to work with? As you said, advocacy work by definition is political work. When you have political work, I wonder about the motivations of all the players who are coming to the table, as well. What is the legitimacy of some of the organizations we've been working with in the past and what should we be looking for in the future? I'm thinking of examples of those *Begum* sitting in big cities like Karachi and New Delhi talking about rural poor women. They've never experienced the life of the rural poor. What is their legitimacy? What is the legitimacy of Oxfam? Who is our constituency? Whom do we speak to?"

John: "This is a really important question, the constituency issue. Many national NGOs do not actually have a national constituency; they survive on grants from international donors. That doesn't mean that they're bad. It just means that they don't have a local support base. They may not have any kind of local fundraising strategy; there may not be a member-based organization. (By the way, *Begum* is a term for aristocratic women in Pakistan or Bangladesh.) You get all kinds of people who have advanced degrees who set up their own NGOs, and they become think tanks. But I don't want to tar all think tanks with the same brush. For example, Oxfam India is working with a think tank on health policy (I've forgotten the exact name of the institute). I was so impressed with the people that I met from that institute, in terms of their thinking about what India's health service could mean for the poor. They had it analyzed very well. That's the type of analysis that we need, but it's not sufficient. We also have to work with other organizations that do have a popular base. Or they might not even be organizations; in India you can have mass movements that are not necessarily associated or registered in a legal sense. The anti-arrack campaign in Hyderabad, India, was started by women who were sick of their husbands' spending all their money getting drunk. They banded together, and as I understand it, they vowed not to give their husbands sex until they stopped drinking. They really formed a powerful force, and they got the law changed in Hyderabad. Those are the types of organizations that we have to be alert to, and the types of movements that we have to work with.

We can't just work with the elite think tanks, and we especially can't just work with so-called think tanks created by retiring civil servants. Those tend to be some of the weakest organizations, but they can have their role because those people have all the contacts within the ministries. It doesn't mean that you necessarily exclude them, but you can't rely on them for everything, especially

more rabid political work. We need to think about weaving an interlocking tapestry of pressure points on where you want to have your influence. We may have to work with those retired civil servants; I actually hated working with them in India. They were pretty self-satisfied, but they knew the secretary, the under-secretary, the deputy under-secretary, the deputy permanent secretary, and all the people that you needed to know in the Irrigation Department. They provided access. Heck, that's what we do in our lobbying work in DC, right? We use lobbyists! We use people that have access. There's nothing wrong with that, but it cannot be the whole strategy."

Q: "You mentioned the importance of not just taking the agenda that civil society has and funding it, but rather trying to shape it ourselves. Then you gave the example of the Indigenous Peoples program in South America. I'm wondering how you would go about changing the agenda of those partners that we work with, because those are partners that have a lot of political clout now, and have grown very strong. In practical terms, in one of our programs, how would you go about trying to sway them into another direction?"

John: "Well, if they're really strong then they probably don't need our money anymore. We have to try to use our program funds in a way that will achieve the best outcome and impact that we can possibly envision. That puts a burden on us to think about how we're going to use our money well and wisely. So, it's not a matter of going against those NGOs or indigenous peoples' organizations; it's a matter of saying, 'Look, folks, the way we're analyzing the situation, there seem to be these elements that we should be working on, and we're not seeing anybody working on them. There are gaps.' So, identifying the gaps and debating about who should fill the gaps is essential. This stimulates a set of discussions, in which there is often some benefit from having an external set of eyes come in and work with the program staff.

Everybody—including me; especially me, maybe—can get into a rut. Even the best national NGOs can get stuck doing the same things over and over again, rather than trying to push the envelope. We often need somebody or some set of people to come in and help provide alternative perspectives, discuss ideas, and think about different ways of working. To some extent, our monitoring, evaluation, and learning [MEL] systems are helping us to do that. We didn't have good MEL systems before. Now, our MEL systems are challenging us to think more creatively about impact and outcome measures. Done well, the Program Strategy Papers (PSPs) should help us think more strategically, too.

Q: "I was just wondering about the whole change goal in development work. I know at the OI level for humanitarian work we're talking about doing much more capacity building—building local society, building the government's capacity, etc. But it never seems like we really get to the point where we're able to determine a strategy for that. It feels like Oxfam is kind of a new player in the field of working with governments. I know what kind of conversations are happening in relation to

humanitarian work, but I was wondering if, in the groups you sit on, there's any talk of how that might look like on the broader spectrum."

John: "Well, that's also an advertisement for next week's section on working with government. This is a really good point. What is the range of things out there? I didn't provide a comprehensive overview, but at the end of the day we're interested in scale and in impact. If we have impact in one tiny village, that's not sufficient. I would much rather change the way that government spends its routine budget. Even if it's just a little change, when it changes the way it spends that money across large numbers of people, that could have a huge impact compared to having a gold-plated pilot project that looks great but doesn't get funded at scale. In fact, today I got a message from Penny Lawrence, the Program Director of Oxfam Great Britain. She had mentioned at our meeting in Oxford last week that Oxfam Great Britain had been trying to analyze their experience with different ways of scaling up, including with the corporate sector, with social media, and perhaps with government, as well. So, they're also thinking about how they get scale.

Take some of the principles that we have talked about like inclusion, co-creation, co-design, and asset ownership. Those principles can cut across whatever activity we're involved in. They are equally helpful when dealing with corporations or governments, or trying to influence people to spend their own resources differently somehow—that's what Saving for Change does. It doesn't influence corporations or governments, but it's trying to influence the way people manage their own resources. That's the other, often overlooked source of power for development change. For the humanitarian people, the Disaster Risk Reduction work specifically identifies improving government policy, government activities, and government investment as a major part of helping the government fulfill its obligations."

Q: "I noticed something, not just today but in general in our field of work. We tend to use the words *civil society* and *citizens* interchangeably. I think that sometimes that's accurate, but a lot of times it's really not. How do we deal with issues of representation? Obviously, civil society organizations are more organized and easier to work with, but sometimes rural or grassroots organizations may be the better partners."

John: "Well, this is a hugely important question. We need to distinguish between *citizens* versus *civil society*. By *civil society*, we explicitly mean some kind of associated form of citizens. So, they have formal or informal form—they can be registered as an organization, but they don't have to be—mass movements, digital formats, virtual communities online—these are forms of civil society that are out there. Because they're working together to some extent; they're working on the same issues of accountability, agenda setting, helping to hold government accountable, helping to debate what the future of society is going to be. Citizens are there as individuals; they have a linkage with civil society but, you're right, they are different.

How we work with different types of civil society is complicated, because we have some legal requirements. For example, we have to make grants to legally recognized organizations. We can't make grants to guerilla groups. We can't even talk to those guerilla groups. As I understand it, there was a time in the early Oxfam days (and this is not just Oxfam America, but other Oxfams as well) that we used to be able to make grants to groups that were not registered. We used to be able to support nascent organizations before they were even organizations. We were able to support ideas when they were just budding; they didn't actually have to be blooming yet. I think there needs to be a review of what our experience with that type of grant making was, compared to the more formalistic grant making we are required by law to do now. I think that would be an interesting study.



Cambodia, Angkor Wat (c.2003), "The new replacing the old, gradually." *John Ambler*

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- What is the best way to set the program agenda when both an INGO and a local NGO are involved?
- How is the relationship between an INGO and a local NGO different when they are both working on the same project with government?
- What transitions does an INGO have to make when it moves from implementer to grant maker?



Karen Ramirez (center) meets with members of a national emergency coordination body in a community affected by a storm surge in El Salvador in 2015. *Elizabeth Stevens / Oxfam America*

8

**Working with
government:
should we or shouldn't
we, and if so, how?**

PREFACE

Today, I want to explore with you working with government. It's really important for us because there's a real debate within Oxfam about how we link to government. Should we work *with* government, should we work *against* government, should we work *around* government or try to avoid government? The answer is contextual, but let's explore some of the things about that context to help us make good decisions. It's also important philosophically, because as Oxfam International we are trying to work together more at the national level, and government is obviously a critical actor at the national level. How we analyze our relationship to government at the national level is really important.

First of all, let's remind ourselves why government is important:

- In terms of our rights-based approach, government is usually the main duty bearer;
- Government has the legitimacy to act in almost all spheres of life, and in all corners of the country;
- It controls significant financial resources: taxes, licensing fees, revenues from corporations;
- Government influences or even controls the space for public discussion.

Government has the duty of ensuring physical security, capital markets, market stability, securing international borders, and regulating extraction and use of renewable and non-renewable resources. The government proposes, debates, and enacts laws at various levels. Last but not least, the government draws up the all-important implementing regulations for those laws:

- It appropriates budget for new and existing laws;
- It shapes policy through its executive branch;
- It manages physical transportation routes and sometimes manages the electronic data highways, as well;
- It runs the court system.

So, the area under the watchful eye of government is huge. We all know that, but it becomes even more relevant when we think about bringing our programs to scale. Somewhere along that journey we will encounter government.

If the government is so important, why have NGOs avoided it? Here's why:

- Some NGOs feel insignificant vis-a-vis the large resources of government;

- Sometimes we like to think of ourselves as pure; we don't want to get involved in the corruption that is often endemic in government departments;
- Sometimes, frankly, we're just not brave enough to get involved in the rough-and-tumble politics that accompany government;
- I think, also, that sometimes we're unwilling to think big. We would rather operate in our own private little space and with less interference, rather than thinking about changing big systems. And sometimes, governments violate our key philosophical tenets. How do we handle that? I'll come to that in a little bit.

One question that comes up often: Are we being too political if we work with government? I think here we have to be careful to define what we mean by "political." Anything practical, if done at scale, is political in some sense, because it involves allocation of resources. Allocation of resources is a political act; you see those debates going on in the US all the time. But that's political with a small "p."

We do not want to get involved in "politics" with a capital "P"—the party politics of elections: who gets into power, who stays in power, or who gets ousted from power. That's party politics. We need to assiduously avoid lobbying and campaigning. By law, we must avoid electoral politics. Even national NGOs must be very careful in this arena.

PROSHIKA in Bangladesh, a very large NGO, started getting involved with party politics—politics with a capital "P." You can see what the government did to them. They chopped them off at the knees; they severely restricted PROSHIKA's ability to function as an NGO. It was a salutary lesson.

The Nobel Prize winner Mohammed Yunus, who started Grameen Bank, was not trying to bring Grameen Bank into Bangladeshi politics, but he himself wanted to get into party politics. Well, that spilled over into repression against Grameen Bank.

We do sometimes get involved in lobbying for specific legislation in countries that we're working in. When we do that, we are subject to the same regulations that the IRS uses to govern lobbying in the US. We have certain restrictions on the absolute amount of money we can spend on direct and indirect lobbying. It doesn't matter whether it's the legislature in the United States, or a legislature overseas; it all comes out of the same IRS quota we are subject to.

But we are engaged in politics (small "p") because we do deeply care about what the people in political positions do, how they actually discharge their roles and functions. In that sense, again with a small "p," we are involved in politics. But we do not get involved in elections or other activities that determine who will be in power.

WHAT DO WE WANT FROM GOVERNMENT?

What do we want the government to be good at? That goes back to that long list of what government has responsibility for. We want the government, ideally, to be good at all of it. And governments are rarely good at all of it. All governments—it doesn't matter if you're talking about a developing country or an advanced industrialized country—are notoriously weak in at least some of those areas.

But let's narrow it down a bit. First of all, we want the government to fulfill its responsibilities as duty bearer. We want transparent, participatory governance. We'd like the protection and promotion of human rights. We want the government to care about its citizens. We want it to have a pro-development orientation, one that has a future vision for the people living in poverty today. In fact, sometimes some of the Asian governments have been described as "development states" or "development-oriented states." We want resources to be spent wisely, especially those all-important routine budget expenses.

But if we are able to improve the way the government performs, even if just a little bit, we can get impact at scale. That's one of the things that I think we sometimes lose sight of. The impact per person may be relatively small, but if you can actually change the way the government spends its money the total impact is great because of the large number of people benefitted.

WHAT ABOUT CORRUPTION?

Unfortunately, we cannot avoid corruption. But "corruption" is a tricky term. There is the greed and graft problem, but corruption in many countries is more than that. Low government salaries are at the root of a lot of problems. Sometimes the public servants are on such low salaries, I think you should consider them retainers rather than real salaries. Somehow they're expected to come up with the rest of the money they need to actually survive. We would call it "rent-seeking" or "corruption;" they might call it "hunting and gathering." They have to figure out some way to survive. I noticed when I was in Indonesia that good bosses had obligations to their subordinates. They had to be a rainmaker; they had to figure out ways to pull in money, not just for themselves to survive but to help their whole department survive. It's tricky, because you have to look at corruption in different ways, according to what kind and level of corruption we're talking about.

In the mid-1980s the World Bank put a condition on some of its loans to Indonesia, saying that it had to reduce the expansion of the public sector staffing levels, because they saw this as a continuing problem. An example of how bad it can get is Bihar in India in the mid-1990s, where 97 percent of the state's budget

went for salaries. Now, that leaves 3 percent for doing things like replacing sewers, fixing roads, and everything else. So, you do have to put pressure, if you were a World Bank or some kind of institution that has influence with the government on those kinds of issues, to make sure the public sector doesn't expand too rapidly.

There's also what's considered reasonable corruption—and what's unreasonable corruption. There's an ethos about that. I'm not condoning corruption, but I'm just saying that there is an ethos about it. There are a couple of versions: There's the "top off" version. It goes like this: "I will give you the quality you want, but it's going to cost you 10 to 15 percent more than what you really should pay." On the other hand, there's the "pay what you should, but..." version. It goes like this, "I'm going to give you the price that you should pay, but you'll get 10 to 15 percent less quality than what you're paying for." These two modes are really different. So, which bridge would you rather cross? I'd rather go across the "top off" bridge! You paid too much, but the bridge is standing there, while the "poor quality" bridge could be a little shaky.



Cambodia (c.2005), "Precarious bridge." *John Ambler*

In Indonesia, contractors are masters at building something that appears great for the first year, because they have a 12-month liability regarding the quality of the construction. By the 13th, 14th month, the works are all falling apart in bad ways.

Corruption is an issue, and we need to think about how our engagement with the government might or might not play into that. Corruption can be eliminated. We have examples of that. Singapore after World War II was just as corrupt as

anywhere. Lee Quan Yew turned it around through a series of policies, super vigilant overseers, and auditors, etc. He turned it into an amazingly honest place, but he was doing it as a very authoritative figure. And, he had a city-state to work with instead of a vast countryside and millions and millions of people.

COMING BACK TO GOVERNMENT

I think the thing that we need to remember is that governments are not monolithic. Individuals make a difference. For example, in Nepal in the 1990s, I saw the positive difference that Dr. Tilak Rawal—the head of the Agricultural Development Bank for Nepal—was making regarding small-scale irrigation. The Irrigation Department was completely apathetic to small-scale irrigation, but Dr. Rawal was not, and he was moving forward some very interesting work. I think within a specific department, you can sometimes find somebody who is very energetic, oftentimes at the Director level. I found cases where the director general—a very high level—was more political, and less interested in actually improving programs. They were interested in other things. But the directors often had a sense of professional pride that pushed them on a personal level to try to make programs better; sometimes you can make deals with those people. When I was going to Afghanistan during the Taliban period, I found that the Governor of Shomali province was ecumenical, worldly, philosophical, open-minded, and well-educated. The governor of Ghazni province was the exact opposite. You could work with somebody like the governor of Shomali, but not the governor of Ghazni.

I think the other thing to think about is: If we're considering working with a government department, does that government agency or department have an incentive to change? What is the structural pressure on them that's going to cause them to change? Because they're not going to change, normally, all on their own. Nobody likes to change, and changing yourself is very difficult unless there's some kind of pressure.

In the 1980s, the National Irrigation Administration in the Philippines faced a crisis. The Congress cut its budget, but it said, "You still have to perform the same mandate, the same functions." So, the National Irrigation Administration's discussion went down like this: "We could turn over small systems to the farmers, and in larger systems we can institute irrigation service fees." Some people responded, "Well, if we're going to institute irrigation service fees, we have to improve our service." And other smart people said, "Well, if we're going to improve our service, maybe we ought to ask the farmers what they want." Then, that led to a whole set of interventions that introduced community organizers into the agency, so they could work with farmers and act as interfaces between the government agency and farmer water user groups. Community organizers could also improve service, increase revenue collection on service fees, and turn over

small systems to water user groups. There was a continuing incentive because the National Irrigation Administration was judged and evaluated on the basis of performing those functions that it now had less money to perform.

Contrast that with another program I know intimately. There was a similar project in Indonesia for turning over small-scale irrigation to farmers. A set of research funded by the Ford Foundation (actually, my dissertation research was part of this set of research) established that the farmers didn't need the government in these small systems. They were as good as or better than anything the government had to offer. So, why not turn them back over to the farmers? There was real strong evidence for that. The government finally agreed to do that, and the World Bank agreed to fund relatively small construction interventions in these systems before they were turned over, or turned back, to the farmers. However, if you got right down to it, the government wasn't really interested in turning over anything. There was no sustained pressure to do that. Their budget, in fact, militated against them turning over, because their operations and management budget was based on how much area they served, how much area they had in their whole system. The more you turn over, the lower their future budget, right? So what did they do? They went through the motions of this turnover program. They probably made some money off the construction parts of the contract. And they told the World Bank that they had turned over this area to the farmers. But I happened to be in West Sumatra talking to one of the low-level irrigation officials who didn't know that I'd been involved in this program at all, and he didn't know that I had an interest in what was going on. And he said quite frankly, "We really pulled the wool over their eyes, because we told them we turned it over but we didn't really. See, here's my inventory." And it showed all the same area. In fact, the area was not even the actual area; it was inflated figures about the area, too. Because they use that to show the central government, "This is how much area we cover, this is how much we need for operation and maintenance." It was a complete scam.

Actually there's another little wrinkle to that story. The amount of money that they had for operation and maintenance of the big systems wasn't enough. In their minds, they were justifying inflating the figures and not turning the small systems over so they could assemble enough money to do what they were actually supposed to do for the larger systems. So, is that corruption? I don't know. This is a tricky one, and these are the types of things that you run up against all the time in working with government.

LESSONS

If you really want government to change, you need some kind of continued pressure from somewhere to make them change. The National Irrigation Administration had it in the form of permanent budget cuts, but they were still

evaluated on their performance in the same way they had been. In India, violent conflict has been a form of permanent pressure. Conflict between the Forest Department and the contractors in production forests, and people who are living in and near the forests is endemic. This, by the 1990s, was becoming increasingly violent. This pressure provided the incentive for a variety of organizations to come together to work with the forest departments at a national and a state level, creating what came to be called the Joint Forest Management Program. That was a pretty good program—on balance. It wasn't perfect, but you did have this continuing pressure, a reason to do something different. Sometimes social pressure can play a big role. I mentioned last week how in Andhra Pradesh in India, the women gathered together to protest against the liquor stores, the arrack stores. That led to, actually, changes in the law at the state level regarding arrack stores. Another source of social pressure can be mass media. It is a good idea to keep the media involved at some level. However, if such attention will engender counter-reaction from other government agencies, it may be a good idea to keep it under the radar.

So, things can happen. But we need to consider any activity with the government very carefully. What kind of pressure is the government really under to change? The logic of doing things better for their own sake is not enough, usually; there has to be some other kind of sustained structural pressure to get change. Is it the reputation of the agency within government circles? Is it public opinion? Is it budgetary? Often, different sources of pressure must come together in order to shift the balance of power.

We need to know what the drivers are for each government unit. Where does the government get its rewards? How is the government evaluated? What drives it to do what it does? If we're going to challenge any of those main drivers, we need to have an alternative. The government's not going to change itself to put itself out of business. Somebody else has to do that, if that's where it's going. A government department is not going to change itself to increase productivity unless they have some incentive to do that or some disincentive not to do that.

Sometimes one government ministry has influence over another government ministry. I found the Planning Commission in Nepal much more powerful for influencing the Irrigation Department than just approaching the Irrigation Department alone, because the Planning Commission had bigger, broader goals in mind.

If you do decide to work with a government agency, here are a couple of things we should remember. Think about that government agency in the same way you would think about a community. You would have to co-design the program with them. You can't just do it all on your own and then expect the government to imitate it and take it over. You would have to co-design it, co-create the idea. You would have to work with the government's own budget. If you want the government to take something over, you have to do things at a budgetary level

that the government will be able to do itself. Don't gold-plate a nice pilot project and then expect a poor government to take it over.

If you do undertake campaigning, be aware that you might set yourself permanently in an adversarial position; most governments do not understand flip flopping between friend and foe. Government is really sensitive about public opinion and its reputation, so we probably want to treat a government differently than, say, we treated Starbucks in our Intellectual Property rights campaign. We'd been working with Starbucks on a number of issues, then we confronted Starbucks about the Intellectual Property rights of the names Yirgacheffe and Sidamo for the coffees, because the Ethiopian communities claim that those names are rightfully theirs to patent, not Starbucks'. Now, we've come back to work with Starbucks more closely since that campaign. But that kind of, "We're your friend. No, we're your enemy. No, we're your friend again," doesn't play well with most government agencies. You might get away with some of that in the US because we were dealing with American NGOs and the US government, but governments tend to have long memories, and I don't think we can use that kind of a tactic with them often.

We will be working more with governments in various forms through our Worldwide Influencing Network. We're going to try to change the way that governments spend their resources, relate to communities, and fulfill their duties as duty bearers.

We're going to be doing that a lot more in the future, but I think that this issue of how we work with governments is going to have to be something that we sort out at an Oxfam International level. We recognize that we need more structural change at the national level. And, there are limits to the efficacy of international campaigning and attending G-20 events. A robust strategy must include working with, alongside, and against national and local governments.

WHEN TO AVOID OR QUESTION WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT

In closing, let me just mention a few areas where we may want to avoid working with government, or where working with government raises questions about whether we should be working with them at all.

We need to understand the relationship between civil society and the government in each specific context. If we're working with government and no one else is, this may be a problem for our reputation. We may not be examining the government as carefully as we should.

We probably want to avoid working with government when the government itself is hopelessly corrupt or hopelessly incompetent. When I worked for CARE in

Bangkok, my deputy, who was from Bangladesh, cried out, “Finally we’re number 1 in something! Bangladesh has been voted number 1 in the Transparency International Index for Most Corrupt Country.” In a context like that, where even USAID does not route its money through the government (USAID funnels its funds through non-governmental organizations), we probably don’t want to get involved with trying to reform the government.

Moral issues play a role in determining who we choose to be our partners. I think we have special challenges in conflict situations. For example, the Taliban in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. The Taliban were hardly a government. They were like an expeditionary force. They were hopelessly incompetent in performing the functions that a government is supposed to perform. They were interested, primarily, in prosecuting the civil war and defeating all the enemies of the Taliban—which meant the Northern Alliance and the Uzbeks under Dostum. They were interested in uniting the country under Taliban rule. They had no interest in providing even basic services.

As a result, CARE (my employer at the time), was actually providing the water supply for roughly half of Kabul. What do you do with a government like that? It’s really a tough moral decision. By providing the water for the population, are you freeing up Taliban resources so that they can prosecute the war? These are the types of decisions we have to make in Darfur in the Sudan. By providing some service that we believe the government itself should be providing, do we let them off the hook? Do we absolve them of their responsibility and allow them to do other things (some of which are sometimes pretty bad)?

Sometimes we have to look at a government’s human rights record and say, “Do we want to be associated with this government at all?” Maybe not; maybe we just need to work on our own.

We should probably use caution or avoid working with governments when maintaining staff security is an issue. I remember, during the civil war in Nepal (that’s 1996 to 2006), the Maoists in the rural areas were targeting any infrastructure that had been built by the government. Blowing up bridges, schools, and things that the government had built did not win hearts and minds. But it sure got the point across. From our perspective (I was working with CARE at the time), we just couldn’t work with the government, or be seen as working with the government. Staff security was at risk if we did that. As it was, we had a couple of people kidnapped. Fortunately, they were released unharmed, but we had to demonstrate that we were an independent NGO and not an agent of the government. There’s a good book called *Anthropology Goes to War*, which details how American academia got embroiled in the Vietnam conflict. It’s a more recent version of what the Dutch sociologist Snouck Hugronje did for the Dutch military in Aceh in Indonesia in the late 19th century. He basically analyzed Acehnese social structure in such a way that it provided useful information for the military.

Sometimes you can work with the governments, if you are impartial, during civil war conflicts. For example, CARE was providing assistance on both sides of the Line of Control in Sri Lanka during the civil war there. It helped people in the North and East which was controlled by the LTTE, but also assisted certain communities outside the Line of Control, in an area under government control. We had to work with the government of LTTE, and we had to work with the government of Sri Lanka. You have to be careful to maintain your impartiality in these cases. So, civil war and conflict issues are a particular challenge for us. When I was regional director for Asia with CARE there were four civil wars going on at the same time in my region: in Afghanistan, in Sri Lanka, in Nepal, and in the Philippines. Tajikistan had just gone through its civil war. India was on slow boil as usual.

I think that's enough from me on this topic. Is anybody on from DC who wants to start the questions?

Q & A PERIOD

Q: "I think there's a group that we don't talk about much and with whom we don't work with very much: politicians. Starting with making a difference by working with government and working with politics with a capital 'P.' And I'm completely conscious that there are legal concerns when we want to work with politicians. But I think that, generally, we should probably do that more. Particularly during elections. And of course we cannot say, "Vote for X party." But we can force political parties to take stands on issues publicly; we can try to influence their platforms. But we can't actually formally join the national political debate issues. And I'm particularly thinking now about strategic planning where we're thinking about how we can influence governments' budgets. And I do think an organization like ours could work in a way to force politicians to actually engage with the public."

John: "That's a really good point. You're absolutely right; while we have certain constraints on the voting side of elections, we don't have constraints in terms of promotion and discussion of the agenda, or about the positions that people take, or about how to better implement good laws. These are areas that we can work in. That doesn't mean that we can work in them in the same way that we work in them in our home country. That's the value of having a footprint or presence in the country itself. So for example, Novib would have a lot of difficulty, I think, working in Northern Pakistan if they were just working from The Hague. Having a physical presence in the country gives you so much more access to people and ideas. You learn what the debates are, where the schisms are, where the factions lay. It helps you strategize, in terms of how to work with that. But again, we have to be really cognizant of the context. Take working with politicians. Working with politicians in India is going to be very different than working with

politicians in Myanmar, next door. If you don't understand that difference, you should be working in your own country."

Q: "I have a question about working with governments. Can Oxfam ever be politically neutral? Because look at a place like Ethiopia, where we work with the government a lot and are working with them more and more, and it's also a government that oppresses people, and locks people up for speaking out about human rights, and censors the Internet, and does a lot of questionable things (and I suspect in many of countries where we work the government does questionable things). If we're going to work with these governments, aren't we sort of implicitly saying that we're okay with what they do? Or, if not, how would we change it?"

John: "Yeah. And that's a really good question, because governments come in all shapes and sizes and forms—and some are pretty nasty. But what you can do with government differs a lot from situation to situation. You can't do in Myanmar what you can do in India, because the conditions are so very different, even though they're right next door to each other. You can't do in Vietnam what you can do in the Philippines, as another example.

But what you can do with government—and I don't think this means necessarily condoning the government—what you can do with government is work from wherever that government is right now and try to push the envelope, try to move them in some way. Because, again, you're giving up some independence to try to get to the scale issue that I was talking about. Because the government's potentially got that scale. If you can move the government—budge them in the right direction—in a way that influences programs and influences budgets, even if they're a nasty government, then you can potentially affect millions of people. You can operate in splendid isolation and work with a community of 5,000 people and say, 'Wow, we really did a lot of work.' Or you can say, 'Okay, I'm going to work with that community of 5,000 people, but I'm also going to work with the government to try to help them get involved in that program to help them understand why it works or why it won't work, and to help them use field experiments like that to change the way government's operating more generally.'

And it doesn't mean that you're condoning the government. It sometimes is nasty to work with nasty governments. I was going to do my field research in Myanmar for my dissertation. Eventually the space closed so much I said, 'No, I'm going back to Indonesia.' That was a statement of mine, that I just couldn't work with that government and get what I needed to get done. But I know that CARE, for example, did some really good work completely on the sly and under the radar screen in trying to help the Forest Department in Myanmar provide more space for Rohingya refugees returning from Bangladesh. It was pretty brave work that was done, completely silently, under the radar screen, and with what at the time was a pretty nasty government. So, I think there are often ways that we can push the envelope and get some real positive results, even with some bad guys. But

some great governments are so heinous that we may need to avoid them for the time being.”

Q: “I would like to speak to that, as well. You know governments are also not monolithic, of course. So, there are large cadres of civil servants who are generally trying to do the right thing and trying to do it well. In many of the places, I’ve worked with some awful governments. But in many of those governments I’ve found really great people to work with, so the place where I think Oxfam faces existential questions is, where do we draw the line? You know, we’re in Sudan because we’re the only ones who didn’t get kicked out. But at what point do we say, ‘Okay, we’d rather get kicked out than continue to be silent on these policies’? For me, that line is right there. We’re looking at that line right now, because we’re providing water supply and sanitation to camps that are nine years old. Those are not camps; they’re suburbs. The government has a responsibility to do that, but as long as they can find someone else to do it, they’ll let someone else do it. Is it life-saving work? It’s not clear to me. So, I think there we are facing a real question about whether the benefit of having eyes and ears on the ground exceeds the cost. I think at this point in the equation, it still does, but it’s something we should be constantly asking ourselves.

Q: I hear so little about corruption, and what we should be doing, and how we should be handling corruption in Oxfam. I find that quite peculiar because I think there isn’t a sphere in life where we’re not confronted by corruption. I’m in the Humanitarian Department; the humanitarian sector itself is highly prone to corruption. There’s no discussion about corruption in our department or in Oxfam. Why is that?”

John: “Because everybody does it. No, that’s not true. I guess one thing we have to admit is that corruption is not limited to governments. Sometimes we find corruption in our partners, or within our own staff. We have to maintain and strengthen our auditing capabilities. We have to work on the moral dimensions of the corruption. All that stuff I was saying about ‘hunting and gathering’ is not applicable to Oxfam staff. Oxfam staff get salaries that don’t require that. So if we find that our staff are not on the straight and narrow, that’s an area where we have to take swift and severe action. In some countries, the ethos about corruption is really different. If the ethos about corruption is, ‘Everybody’s corrupt. Everybody does it, and why not my department, my ministry, my agency, my company?’ that’s a hard environment to fight against. You have to hold yourself to a higher standard. At some point, I think you have to ask, ‘Do I want to work in this environment or not?’ I can see the possibility of saying, ‘This country is so corrupt. I know that there is a large segment of people who are suffering a lot. But there are a large number of people suffering in other countries that are not as corrupt. Maybe I could get more work done in a less corrupt country.’ This has been a little bit of the logic behind the Millennium Challenge Corporation, in terms the agreements they set up with countries for US aid, through the MCC. They basically have looked at that corruption issue and they said, ‘Okay, our standards

for not-excessive corruption have been met in this country. Therefore, they've passed that hurdle for being eligible.'

If you looked for corruption everywhere in every action, you probably couldn't get anything done on a practical basis, because you would be spending all your time and resources auditing things. So, I think we have to find some kind of a Middle Path, where we do a reasonable amount of auditing and we do a lot of work in working with our partners, identifying gaps. When we strengthen our partners, we should be strengthening their accounting mechanisms, helping them build in redundancies and ability to catch a misuse of funds. In the humanitarian area, we have to do a lot of work in *prepositioning relationships*—developing relationships with good organizations and strengthening them more, so when the emergency happens we can work with them immediately. So much in the past has been taught about prepositioning goods. That may still be important in some ways, but I think that prepositioning these relationships is even more important. When we think about institutional strengthening, it's not just their logistical ability, their ability to use a project manager and spreadsheets, etc. It's their auditing functions, their accounting systems, and the moral training that they give their own staff in dealing with issues like corruption. It's a tough one; still no easy way."

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- How does a Working Group help limit the dominance of the government?
- When would Oxfam, or an INGO, choose not to work directly with a local government?
- How should Oxfam's policy of doing more advocacy at national level factor in the national government?



Voluntary members of the Oxfam water and sanitation committee head into Jamam refugee camp in Sudan to spread messages to young women about good hygiene practices, and to distribute female hygiene kits, which include underwear, soap and sanitary cloth. *John Ferguson / Oxfam*

9

What women want

Well, I figure with a title like, “What Women Want,” I would get a few men looking for good advice and a lot of women looking for a good fight! Given the low male turnout today, maybe today’s men are from Venus, and today’s women are from Mars! We’ll see where the discussion takes us today, however venal or martial that may be.

DISCLAIMER

First, a disclaimer. I am not a gender expert, nor am I a “Women in Development” or a “Gender and Development” guru. I’m not a Gender Studies specialist. My experience in this area is more practical than theoretical, and more anecdotal than systematic. At the end of the day, however, I think I can consider myself a feminist. (Men can be feminists, too!) Maybe not a feminist activist, but at least a feminist. But let’s talk, and you can be the judge.

I did want to use this seminar as an opportunity to organize some of my own thinking on gender, and to tap your thoughts. I know many of you have thought about this topic of Gender and Women’s Development much more deeply than I have or ever will. So, you’ll have to bear with me if some of the things I say are simplistic, or totally obvious to you. But I think they’re not obvious to a lot of men, and to some women as well. I want you to treat each of the statements I make as a hypothesis, not as an assertion and certainly not as an axiom. And, as such, anything I say can and should be challenged. I ask you to be frank in your questions, but also to be lenient if the answer you receive is not to your complete satisfaction. We’ll still be friends, right?!

WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?

Some of you may have seen the movie with Mel Gibson and Helen Hunt called, *What Women Want*. In the film, if I remember correctly, Mel touches a live electrical wire and the ensuing shock reorders his male chauvinist brain and male chauvinist ear in such a way that he can suddenly and miraculously read women’s minds. He “hears” them for the first time in his life. Now, he wants to use this mysterious power for his own devices. Okay, I know, the premise itself is pretty chauvinist. It’s not as if women never say what they want. They are usually very articulate. It’s the men who have trouble understanding, not because their cochlea need electrical stimulation, but because they do not want to hear anything that potentially challenges men’s dominant social position! But I should emphasize that this is not just a gender issue at the personal level. When it comes to designing multimillion dollar development interventions, we as development professionals still seem to have trouble understanding what women really want, in what order, and how to achieve it. And if we don’t understand

women's priorities, we get our interventions wrong. Development professionals also tend to conveniently ignore the techniques of subordination men employ to keep women in reproductive roles and out of productive and more powerful roles. Furthermore, the similarities women have in their reproductive roles across the world tends to obscure the fact that women themselves are not a homogeneous group. They have their own hierarchies and multiple expressions of diversity. But, when men are fixated with keeping women in their reproductive role, they tend to ignore these hierarchies and differences. Women are not homogenous and the form of our development interventions must be custom made for each of the challenges they face.

By the way, there's a Chinese version of *What Women Want*, starring Andy Lau and Gong Li. Comparing the American and Chinese versions would be really interesting! One, from the USA, a capitalist state that sometimes seems to be going backwards on women's rights; the other, from China, socialist state that claims gender equality yet has some of the highest sex selective abortions and female infanticide in the world. Hmmm. What would we conclude if the movies are essentially the same?!

THE ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

I am actually going to dodge this topic, but I want to state clearly that I am dodging it. It is an important subject and there are fierce intellectual debates on the origins and visible and invisible mechanisms of the perpetuation of women's subordination. Some people talk about the role that men's muscular superiority plays—the role of brawn. Some talk about the role men play in restricting access to “their women” as a way of increasing the chances that her children are his alone. The WID (Women in Development) movement itself has been criticized for not providing enough insights into these processes. Gender and Development (GAD) proponents specifically criticize WID's narrow focus on women instead of looking at broader relations between men and women—i.e., gender relations—and they critique WID's apparent goal of just making women more efficient contributors. The GAD movement sees solving gender inequality as a problem for development to wrestle with in and of itself rather than a means to solving other problems. To do that means understanding the roots of women's subordination. I suggest those of you who are interested in the subject to go back and read some of the economic anthropology literature, particularly that of the French Marxist anthropologists Claude Meillassoux and Maurice Godelier.

THREE BATTLEFIELDS: HOME, SOCIETY, AND STATE

So where is this battle—this engagement with the gender issue—playing itself out? The battle covers issues of rights and dignity, respect and identity, and recognition resources and autonomy.

Women are fighting for equality on multiple levels—on three interconnected fronts. They have to fight on the family level, on the societal level, and against the state.

First, women are engaged in a struggle within the family. Although in so-called progressive societies the reach of the law extends to social relations within the house, we all know that people's actual attitudes do not necessarily mirror the black letter law. For example, domestic violence is greatly underreported, even though it is a crime in many countries and where women and men theoretically have equal protection under the law. Here is the oppression of under-investment in women. I quote from our gender expert, Aivelu Ramisetty:

“Within families, women provide the care work which includes daily household work of water, fuel collection, cooking, cleaning, repairing, washing, and the long-term education and support, health care and attention to children, disabled, elderly or ill people. As women and girls provide the majority of unpaid care they are subject to time poverty, where they have little time to develop their own education skills, or other skills. They have little time to take care of their own health or get sufficient rest and leisure. This drudgery, lack of investment, invisibility and excessive time required of women to help others, compromises women's ability to lead lives of dignity, opportunity and fulfillment.”

On this time issue, I remember reading a study of a highland community in Nepal. The men spent over 11 hours a day working in agriculture. Eleven hours a day—that's really a lot. But women were spending 15 hours a day working, doing all the things that Aivelu mentions. When we're talking about assisting women, this time poverty issue comes up. Furthermore, women are often simultaneously doing multiple tasks!

Women would like, our experience shows, help with some of these time poverty dimensions. But how to relieve some of the drudgery? This is no easy fix, as we will see.

So we are talking not only about women who want to play new roles, but also those who just want to fully carry out the traditional roles that their husbands, children, relatives, and neighbors have defined for them. It is not easy to love and simultaneously fight against the people you are closest to.

Second, women struggle with broader society. Even if the atmosphere is conducive for them to play expanded or non-traditional roles within the family,

they must still contend with broader societal attitudes toward women. And, of course, there is a close link between levels of oppression felt at the societal level and those felt within the family. They can feed each other. Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian feminist, wrote, “The regime oppresses everyone, but society oppresses only women.”

Where does another important social phenomenon, religion, fit in? Every religion has a range of interpretations, from conservative to liberal. Islam, in some of its more conservative versions, such as Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia, or Deobandi, that grew up in India and influenced the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, or the Salafi movements in the Middle East—is held up as a “total framework for life.” In its conservative forms, Islam is held up as inseparable from society. In other words, under this *Weltanschauung* one does not—indeed, cannot—distinguish between religious and social institutions. So, if Mona Eltahawy is saying that society oppresses women, then this becomes a challenge because that means that religion affords no relief from an oppressive society and, conversely, society provides no relief from a conservative religion. That would suggest that if a secular country oppresses women, and if religion is viewed as inseparable from society, that religion is necessarily oppressing women? There is an excellent book, titled *Liberal Islam*, that gives many counterexamples, showing how Islam can be legitimately interpreted to preach tolerance toward women and even the promotion of their rights. In that collection, an important article by the Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi lays out the argument that the *hadiths*, the sayings of the Prophet, have often been misused, misremembered, misquoted, or even made up, to support subordination of women in ways Islam never intended.

So much depends on local interpretation. If people are bombarded week after week from the *mimbar* (pulpit) with messages about the presumed natural order of a subordinate position for women, and you’ve got the same messages coming out of the conservative Christian sects, both children and adults of both sexes are likely to absorb and internalize those attitudes. In Egypt, for example, a recent survey found that 66 percent of women under 30—these are young “modern” women—believe husbands are justified in beating their wives if they talk alone with other men. Now, Egypt tends to be a relatively open society within many of the Islamic traditions. They’ve had good contacts with the rest of the world; Al-Azhar in Cairo is known as a famous institution of learning within the Muslim world. And this is not just an issue with Islam. Unfortunately, worldwide some of the more tolerant religious traditions, such as American liberal Catholicism, are under renewed attack by hardline clerics. The American women’s movement, which was both riding the coattails of the reforms and more ecumenical outlook of the Vatican II Conference, and also in turn influencing it, lost a lot when Pope John the XXIII passed away. In Hindu traditions, women are also accorded a secondary stature according to the Vedic traditions. One by one, we can go through the religious traditions of the world and find glaring examples

of spiritually sanctioned inequality. It's tough when women not only have to struggle within secular society, but within a self-proclaimed higher moral order that undergirds religious society, as well. Clearly, the male leadership of the male-dominated religions of the world cannot be trusted to pontificate on who women are or what they need or want. So, religion is a challenge for us. I'll come back to that when I talk about recommendations.

We often find that broader societal values are reinforced within the family. But what about the situation where you have broader societal values promoting equality? In highly restrictive societies, women may find some solace back inside the family compound, or they may just find that broader societal values are replicated and reinforced within the household. Conversely, even in societies where outside the home women have attained significant status and visibility, that freedom of action is not necessarily replicated within the family. For example, when I was working with CARE programs in Tajikistan a decade ago—Tajikistan was the poorest of the Soviet Republics and it is the poorest of the former Soviet Republics today—I was told that during the Soviet period women were roughly an equal part of the workforce. They were supposed to receive equal pay for equal work, and they could be and often were promoted through merit. But there were glass ceilings for women even in a socialist society. Within the formal workforce, they had important roles, rights, responsibilities, and rewards. How did that translate back into the family environment? Actually, not very well. Indeed, women were in a more open public workspace, but then they would come home and be subject to the same types of male-dominated social structures that they thought they were getting away from through the Socialist Revolution. Men would beat their wives; men would spend the couple's money on alcohol. Men would basically do whatever they felt like, and there was no one to challenge their perception of being lord and master of the household. It's a challenge. Even when society is more open and supportive of women's rights, they still have to come back home and deal with structures of subordination within the family.

Indeed, even some fundamental socialist texts, such as Engels' well-known 1884 treatise *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, proclaim that patrilineal forms of social organization are superior to matrilineal forms, and they predict that matrilineal forms will eventually die out. Matrilineal or *matrifocal* forms of social organization are definitely in the minority worldwide, but they haven't disappeared. We find them, sometimes in isolated groups, but even sometimes in a mainstream group. Another time I can talk about the interesting combination of a matrifocal social structure and patrilineal Islam, which one finds in Minangkabau society in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Among the Minangkabau, which is an advanced and modern society by any standard, irrigated rice land, traditional communal family houses, and hereditary titles pass through the female line. These are not tribal people living in the jungle. This is a highly modern society; they get three crops of rice a year, most of the roads are paved, they

have electricity and Internet. You go to the towns and they look like any small town you might find in the US. These are highly advanced folks. Yet, at the same time they are devoutly Muslim. Now that's an interesting combination, isn't it? Matrilineality with Islam? So it can happen, and you can find just about any combination of society and religion and social structure to be an exception to the rule. So, matrilineal societies are not disappearing as fast as Engels thought they would. But they can be under cultural assault. For example, Tibet has many matrilineal aspects in its traditional social structure. But now it's under assault by the patrilineal structures of the incoming Chinese Han majority. But matrilineality holds on. But that is a topic for another day.

Social crisis can sometimes create expanded opportunity for women to rise, maybe more quickly or to a higher level than they would have otherwise risen. For example, the crises of murdered husbands and fathers were instrumental in the rise to power of women in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. World War II was really a watershed moment for women in many countries, because so many men were fighting the war that women moved into factory jobs for the first time. Rosie the Riveter—with her red bandana, flexing her bicep—happened in a lot of countries, not just in the United States. After the war the problem was that women often lost their jobs to the returning servicemen. They were relegated to more clerical and lower-paid positions. But at least this was the way that they began to move into the formal labor market. Women also have risen to important positions during times of socialist revolution—witness the case of Vietnam, Cuba, and Mozambique. The ethnic cleansing and upheaval in Rwanda and Burundi in the mid-1990s propelled women into positions of more power and rights. We'll see if they can maintain those gains. It's a sad commentary on the forces women are dealing with that even in these revolutionary societies, it seems that the further away you get from the revolutionary era the more women's power in society wanes and reverts to some kind of pre-revolutionary chauvinistic equilibrium. Women start to lose power. It's hard to maintain and succeed themselves in those positions of authority that they got during the revolution and immediately following. Nearly 100 years after women got the vote in the US, we still only have 20 women senators, out of 100, and we think that is a big victory. Adam Smith's Invisible Hand may be at work helping to organize the market, but a different kind of invisible hand, a distinctly male one, seems to be at work in trying to keep women bolted into subordinate social positions.

The third battleground is the one in which women struggle vis-à-vis the state. It is no accident that people in high positions in the state realize very well that control of women allows them to be able to control society. It's really difficult to get good, pro-women's legislation through in many countries. When it is time to vote, politicians court the female electorate. After the election it is usually a different story. People in positions of authority are notoriously unsympathetic to broadening the actual legal powers of women. Gendered patterns of

occupational segregation are persistent, and women are heavily engaged in the legally vague informal economy where their exposure to exploitation is large. This is why it's so significant whenever we make progress with real legal reform, such as the Family Law in Mozambique or the Inheritance Law in Zimbabwe, both of which allow women to inherit significant property for the first time. Implementation of the law will take some time but it does provide a legal platform for women to work from.

But legal reform, as important and necessary as it is, is not sufficient by itself to create a new and durable set of broader and more inclusive societal values. And, there are diversions along the way. *Lex simulata*, or showcase (artificial) law, is often used as a concession to women's movements by the men who promulgate these laws without ever intending to promote real change. Some women activists in Egypt complain that the reformist personal-status laws for women sponsored by Suzanne Mubarak—the wife of Hosni Mubarak, the ex-strongman of Egypt—were intended to only go so far and no further. They were cynical laws meant to give the *impression* of legal reform without actually tackling the fundamental problems of patriarchy in Egyptian society.

The intention of the state is really important. Analysis of environmental law regulation and enforcement in the United States during the George W. Bush era shows that so many good laws were just ignored. Bush didn't have to change the law; he just sent out signals that he wasn't particularly interested in enforcing particular laws. That had a big effect on the way that law was actually utilized. Even those gains may be reversed under the new government. Furthermore, even when a law benefiting women is actually a serious law, the state in its implementation of the law often displays contempt for the spirit of the law. For example, look at how high the evidentiary burden of proof is in many countries for a woman to support a claim of rape.

So, women struggle with the family, with society, and with the organs of the state. No wonder women are strong! No wonder women are tired!!

IMPROVING CONDITIONS IN THEIR CURRENT ROLES VERSUS PROMOTING DIFFERENT ROLES FOR WOMEN

So, how to help women? First, I think it is important to distinguish between working to improve conditions for women—helping them play their traditional roles more effectively, or with less time poverty—versus helping them play new roles. My experience suggests that at very low income levels women are extremely concerned about maintaining the continuity and survival of the family. Thus, for the sake of their families, women try to protect and improve their traditional roles. This mirrors to some extent the debate about women's roles in

reproductive versus productive activities, and biological versus social reproduction.

But think about our Saving for Change program in this regard. When women get even a little above even the most basic subsistence levels, we see how quickly they want to play new roles, which often involve more decision-making authority, more entrepreneurship, more engagement with the outside community, greater financial risk and reward, and greater personal autonomy. They want to move into positions of greater power, positions that transcend their reproductive roles. For example, women in Mali in the Saving for Change program cite the increased influence they have within village society as one of the greatest achievements of the program. They want the solidarity; they want the security that being in a group tends to provide. If they get sick, somebody's going to help them with their fields and their children. The savings part of the program is important, but it isn't even the most important part of the program in their minds. Women in SfC villages are becoming local political forces. SfC gives them a legitimate reason to congregate outside the house. The right to assembly is a powerful right. In Latin America, a woman in Honduras explained to me earlier this year that as a result of Oxfam Great Britain's women's program she could now "step over the threshold" without asking her husband's permission. "Going over the threshold," in a very literal sense, was hugely important for her. That was a new and fundamental right for her. Another woman, who had only a 6th grade education, was emboldened enough to run for local mayor in the town of Santa Maria de la Paz. For these women, the path to greater economic empowerment had to first go through achieving critical rights goals, including the right to information, the right to decide, the right to assemble, the right to vote, and the right to equal protection under the law. Economic life is hard for these women, but they are not destitute or on the edge of destitution. Rights were at the top of their list of priorities. The reasoning seems to be that greater economic empowerment would come to women if they could first gain more rights. We need to keep this in mind. If we just approach development saying, "Oh, women just need more credit," for example, I don't think we're going to get at the underlying issue. Women need other kinds of rights, and we need to think carefully about the sequencing. Do we work on these other rights: the visibility, the recognition, the dignity, identity? Are we going to work on those issues first or simultaneously? I don't think we've discussed this very much within Oxfam America.

Men, however, often have a different view. I suggest that men usually think about improving women's lives in a much narrower sense—that is, improving women's ability to function in their current and traditional roles, as opposed to improving their ability to take on new roles. Thus, women remain in the same reproductive roles, and development may help them to be more effective in those roles, without challenging the roles themselves. Even where women are allowed to go beyond reproductive roles, the debate—at least in the WID literature—is about instrumentalizing women to make them more productive or efficient, rather than

thinking about these larger sets of rights. Men avoid the debate about giving them more power. This essentially keeps the glass ceiling intact. For example, after the earthquake in northern Pakistan a few years ago, one international relief agency provided what seemed to me to be a suspiciously large number of sewing machines as part of its rehabilitation effort. I'm sure that women lost a lot of sewing machines in the quake, but I wonder how much of that particular choice of intervention was a response to women's actual priorities versus how much it was a response to certain male conceptions about women's priorities. I presume that it was most likely the product of male decision-makers in Pakistan dealing with male aid givers, rather than the result of talking to the women directly.

We also see how men so often try to control new technology, even, or perhaps especially, when such technology would be to the benefit of women. For example, take the simple handheld weeder, which is so necessary for the System of Rice Intensification work that we do in Cambodia. Even this simple \$15 item has been appropriated by men, but then it is rarely utilized because weeding is considered "women's work." Men have appropriated the technology, the manufacturing, the distribution. And in many cases men are not engaged actively in helping their wives or daughters get access to the weeder. And this is an example from Southeast Asia, a region of the world where there is relative parity between men and women, certainly compared to South Asia and East Asia. By keeping even this simple technology out of women's hands, the men reinforce the current subordinate roles of women and limit their access to greater productive, and more powerful functions. So, even though withholding the technology hurts their own crop yields, men may be willing to forgo higher profits as long as they can maintain their control over how gender value is added in the production process. We probably should be marketing the weeder entirely through women's networks and keeping men out of the process as much possible.

Women don't want just change around the edges; they want to be able to play new roles. They don't want to be able to just produce widgets more efficiently, they want to run the widget factory, or convert the widget factory into a bicycle factory, or to sell the widget factory and develop a software company, or something else. In other words, they want more power over decisions that matter. So, if we are to be gender sensitive in identifying priorities for intervention, we have to actively move beyond what is and courageously open ourselves up to the wider possibilities of what a situation of empowered women could potentially look like. We need to think about how women could be playing different roles and have a different status than they have now. This is not easy, and it's going to take some work on our part.

Well then, do you just ask women? Unfortunately, it's not that simple. A first step to getting our interventions right, certainly, is to ask women directly what they want, and to ask them in ways that will elicit the honest answers. I will not go into

the range of good methodologies here. That is a complicated subject that we do not have time to go into today.

But let me give one methodological example for heuristic purposes. I remember reading about a PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) mapping exercise carried out by MYYRADA in Karnataka, India, that was written up a long time ago in *PRA Notes*. First, as part of the baseline collection of data the men were asked to produce a map of their village and its resources. They got the roads and houses and agricultural fields right. They were asked, "Is this everything?" They replied, "This is absolutely everything. We know exactly what our village consists of." But when the women were asked to comment on the men's map, they laughed and added the water sources, which the men had forgotten. Surprise, surprise. That's women's work, so the men didn't know about the water sources. So far, so good. But it took asking the children commenting on the adults' map to get the pastures finally included. The children were, after all, the goatherds and shepherds. So, the lesson is, beware of relying too much on one group's opinion to understand another group's priorities! If you're going to talk about priorities, you really do need to figure out ways to talk to people directly. Don't assume that somebody else knows what women's priorities are. Figure out a way to talk with women directly. In some cases, that's not easy because they've been secluded or sequestered, or otherwise made not very available to outsiders.

That insight is further corroborated by an experience I had in Thailand. In northern Thailand, the Raks Thai Foundation asked women suffering from HIV/AIDS what their priorities were regarding the disease. The outsiders with a medical background, who all happened to be men, predicted that women would rank access to anti-retroviral drugs as their highest priority. Such drugs were indeed on the women's list, but, in fact, they identified non-discrimination as their highest priority. They wanted to be able to send their children to school and not have the children ostracized in any way, and they wanted to be able to go to the market without being heckled or shunned. Dignity was being valued more highly than direct health interventions. Lack of respect to women was the primary source of disempowerment that they identified.

In our own Saving for Change Program (SfC), a survey taken back in 2005 in Mali revealed that the saving and credit facility was actually not the highest reason why women joined the program. They were already quite familiar with the *tontines*, traditional revolving credit and savings associations, so they knew roughly what they were getting with SfC. But the women's ranking revealed that while the financial dimension was considered important, the women gave the highest priority to the solidarity and security benefits of the program. For example, women said that by joining the Saving for Change groups they immediately became part of a group whose members could potentially help watch their children if they got sick or help in labor exchanges to cultivate their fields. Yes, they liked the saving and credit facility, but they put an even higher priority on aspects of the program that served to insure and ensure their "primary

producer roles” —as agriculturalists and as mothers. But it didn't take the women long to realize the other empowerment benefits of the program. They are now taking a much larger role in the politics, challenging village authority in sometimes subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways. We now find a high demand among women in the Saving for Change program for more entrepreneurial skills, which means they want to play new roles, not just execute their existing roles better. It seems they are both consolidating existing gains and quickly venturing into new roles and new social relations within the village, and beyond the productive role.

Sara Musa, our regional director for the Horn of Africa, once told me another story, one about her work with UNDP in northern Pakistan. A particular project was designed to bring piped water to the remote villages of Baltistan. Everyone, including the women, agreed this was a high priority. Well, as it turned out, the women hated the program even though they were the primary beneficiaries, and even though they themselves had identified lack of drinking water as one of the critical constraints they face daily. Bringing in piped water saved hours of walking each day, yet the women disliked it. Why? Again, if the people, probably men, who designed the program had understood more about local social structure, they would have understood that fetching water was the only time during the day that women were allowed to be outside of their housing compounds, and it was the only time during the day that they had some modicum of freedom. It was during those walks to the spring to fetch water that they could discuss issues such as domestic violence, education, status of women, husbands' habits, the quality of purchased seeds and fertilizers, government services, the health of family members, etc., etc. They could talk about all the things that were really important as mothers, as wives, as producers, as entrepreneurs, as citizens. Once the demand for drinking water was met through other means, it meant that the piped water supply became another instrument of gender-related social repression. I don't know what the answer is, but closer consultation and more intense engagement with the women may have yielded a different solution to the dilemma of time saved versus freedom foregone.

LEGAL CHANGE

In the early 1990s, the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India regarding Panchayati Raj was passed. In a nutshell, one of the provisions of the amendments stipulates that formal village level councils will be created and that one-third of the members of each council must be women. Looking back over the last nearly 20 years, the results are significant. It seems as though there have been four stages that people have gone through. The first phase was that although the requisite number of women was elected to the councils their husbands attended the meetings in their stead while the women stayed home. In

the second phase the women went with their husbands to the meetings, but they did not speak. The third phase was that women still went with their husbands, but now they were emboldened to actually speak for themselves. In the latest phase, which not every one of these villages has reached in 20 years, real empowerment can begin to be seen. Now women attend without their husbands, and they are not afraid to speak their minds. But this type of change takes 10 to 15 years, and it takes place during a time when self-help groups in India and other forms of economic and social empowerment are also proliferating and providing added support for women to become more visible in society. As important and powerful as the law was—and without the law we never would have gotten that—you need all these other support systems to help women play the more empowered roles that the law was supposed to underpin. This example helps to put things in temporal perspective; we should not be too impatient with the implementation of a law that attempts to shift basic societal norms. It probably takes multiple interventions over a decade or more to get it right. And besides, if a law can be changed very easily it can also easily change back or into something new and undesirable. So, the lesson is: Hang in there and keep fighting; deeply entrenched structures take deep commitment and continuing resources to combat. This is a message I wish the donors would hear, also.

Let me give you a very different example. This comes from Charlotte Yeh, a friend of mine who is the Chief Medical Officer for AARP. Thirty years ago, as a young doctor, she was going back and forth to Mexico working with a low-income clinic. And in Mexico 30 years ago, even more than today, men defined their masculinity in terms of the number of children they had. “More children, more power, more masculine; let’s have lots of children.” These attitudes are actually changing a lot as economic development has happened. (I experienced that myself in Indonesia. In 1975 when I was talking to university students—and I was just one year out of university myself—I said, “How many children do you want to have?” They said, “Oh, not many. Only five.” And that was not many, because their parents had eight or nine or 10. If you ask the same question now, they’ll say, “One or two.”) Going back to that time 30 years ago when Charlotte Yeh was visiting these clinics in Mexico, the women begged her, “Please give me a double prescription of birth control pills. That way I can throw one packet out in front of my husband, and I can secretly take the other one.” So, there are ways around this that we need to think about.

There’s a great book by James Scott, who’s an anthropology professor at Yale, called *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. It’s done on peninsular Malaysia, but it shows how people who are in subordinate positions are not helpless. They have agency; they have ways of coping. We should sometimes do more to understand those ways of coping than we do.

Now, coming back to the fundamental question, why do men have such a difficult time understanding the priorities of women? I believe a large part of the reason is that men do not first challenge their own basic unstated or stated assumption that

they should be in power and that they should be controlling women. Anything that falls outside of this basic platform is like seeds falling on barren ground. If women are really empowered, then it means men need to give up some power. Men don't want to hear that, which I believe is a reason that men continually and intentionally misunderstand women's priorities. Or, they understand them only in terms that allow them to reinforce the status quo. The predictable result is lots of sewing machines!

It turns out that asking women what they want may not be as simple as it seems!

PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS

So, given all this, and remembering that gender is about relations *between* men and women, not about women alone, what are some programming options for Oxfam?

First, we really do need to take more care in working with women to understand their priorities, the best sequencing for addressing their priorities, and the ways women suggest moving forward. We need to work more intensely with women on identifying these issues of empowerment and dignity—the intangible things—along with the economic and more tangible things. They have to go together, and we have to figure out a better way of addressing those. We should be particularly attentive to their expressed rights priorities. Anything less than more intensive and sensitive engagement with women will not produce the type of results that are “gender responsive.” Our Program Strategy Papers and Campaign Framework documents have been recently reviewed. We find that the extent to which PSPs address gender equity and gender justice is inconsistent, thereby limiting the ability of programs to achieve more equitable and sustainable results on behalf of women.

Second, legal change, even if only *pro forma* at first, is often very important. When I was living in Hanoi, there were several times when I pointed out to high Communist Party officials that the Vietnamese Constitution itself already supported particular human rights pretty strongly. It was hard for them to argue against their own Constitution. But even lower-level laws can be very important. If the law is on our side, it puts us in a good place to try to get more effective gender-appropriate implementation. Under the new Oxfam Strategic Plan and in our own new Strategic Plan, we're going to be doing more with legal change at the country level. But we need to be realistic. Legal change and subsequent good implementation is no less complicated in other countries than it is here in the USA. And if it were easy to change the law we should be worried, too. Because then it could easily change to something else. When we think about the law, we need to think about moving the law and society forward at the same time.

Third, there is an important debate about which comes first: expanding women's economic opportunities or expanding women's rights. Do we help women first do better in their existing roles, or do we help them move into new roles? The answer is probably: "It's complicated." I do not subscribe to the Marxist view that ideology simply springs from materialist roots. The ideology of sex roles must certainly be a complex and intertwined set of processes that varies according to the situation. In some societies the path to better social status may lead through economic empowerment directly. In others, the critical constraint may be education or rights. Unfortunately, in the majority of poor countries -- and some rich countries as well -- there are huge barriers in all three of the domains mentioned earlier -- family, society, and state. Still, I hope that we can agree that working on economic opportunities, narrowly defined, alone is not enough. Conversely, working on women's civil rights opportunities without helping them also gain access to the resources that men use to take advantage of those social spaces is also insufficient. Women need skills and credit and insurance and legal protection and everything else men have access to if they are to have a chance to succeed, but they're not enough. We need to work on expanding social space for women. Local NGOs can work on broadening the social arena, but really the main actors—the main drivers and agents of change—have to be women themselves. So that's where we need to help women's groups get more agency, help them get more opportunities. We need to work with women's groups and alliances more than we do as part of that program.

GAD scholars rightly point out that the so-called gender gap cannot be closed at a material level just through technical interventions like credit. Women need the social space to exercise their skills and apply those resources as well. They need agency. So, economic and social empowerment needs to be pursued simultaneously. At the end of the day, we need to make sure that we do not forget issues of respect: dignity, opportunity, decision-making, consultation, identity, recognition, and visibility as core social empowerment outcomes we would like our interventions to produce. Remember, women have often identified those attributes as being more important than many more technical kinds of development interventions. The sociologist William Alkire forcefully notes that agency and opportunity structure are both essential ingredients of empowerment. Supporting women's groups and alliances among and with women's groups can be an important mechanism for expanding agency. We should do more to explore these opportunities with Oxfam Novib, which has a longer track record of working with such groups and networks.

Fourth, a certain amount of propagandizing and awareness-raising can be useful. I think of the television soap opera on HIV-AIDS in Vietnam produced by CARE that significantly broadened people's perspectives on the social and medical aspects of the disease, and expanded the space for dialogue and practical action.

The program did more to expand understanding of the disease as a medical condition and as a social phenomenon than any other thing that I can think of. Moving to action at scale is another matter, but basic mass awareness-raising is not rocket science. Using mass media to help women know the rights they already have is important in many countries. Sometimes things like a soap opera may be a way that we can reinforce our other programs.

Fifth, there is the issue of religion. It's both a cultural issue and a legal issue, but it is not an issue we can blithely ignore if we think about the rights of women. I talked about religion earlier, and about how it can be interpreted in a variety of different ways. But normally we don't deal with religious leaders, as if somehow they're in a world by themselves. Our programming should reach out more to religious leaders in a proactive way. The law, especially when it is based on the fundament of certain religions, or on societal norms that have become practical social law, needs to be addressed not just through formal legislation but through attitudinal change, as well. We need to think about these social structures as potentially our major allies. Working with progressive religious thinkers can be an important angle of attack on gender-biased realities. But obviously, given the sensitivities, we need to tread carefully when we enter the realm of faith-based institutions.

Sixth, although we do not do much of it within Oxfam America, we should not forget the importance of education for women. It can be catalytic and empowering. But given all the other challenges women face, education must be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition of greater agency and empowerment. Getting girls to at least study through 10th grade seems to be crossing a threshold for girls.

Finally, all of the male badmouthing aside, not all males are bad! Programming can and should build on sympathetic male structures and attitudes, where they exist. I think in a past seminar I mentioned the Community Owned Primary Education (COPE) project in Afghanistan. During the Taliban era, of the 23,000 rural elementary-school children in this program 46 percent of them were girls! Without going into detail again, suffice it to say that many local men were willing to fight directly against the Taliban if it meant protecting the village schools in which their girls as well as their boys were taught. I think it's important that we recognize that there are a lot of men out there that we can potentially rely on, and we do need to work more with men. As the commentary I got during the last few days suggested, empowering men is partly the key to empowering women. Think about it as an analogy to the economic distribution issue: If all the wealth is held by one person, there's no market, right? As you get more and more income maldistribution, the market starts to slow down. I think about that the same way in social terms: As you get more and more power concentrated in the hands of men, the social market tends to slow down. So, there are powerful arguments for redistributing social power just as there are powerful arguments for redistributing economic power, in terms of making society work better. That's the economic

argument; there are also all the psychic arguments about identity, recognition, and invisibility that are really important.

So, we have quite a spectrum of potential intervention points spanning from legal change at one end to *en masse* social change from the grassroots up like Saving for Change efforts at the other. But attitudinal change that actually leads to behavioral change at a societal scale is notoriously difficult to achieve. Cultures are resilient, and male-dominated cultures may be among the most resilient and recalcitrant. True cultural change, and that is what we aspire to here, is an intergenerational issue. Changing attitudes and cultural norms toward a more enlightened view of gender needs to be faced the same way the Dutch face the sea—with perpetual vigilance and constant investment. It's not something you invest in one time and achieve something stable.

Well, in closing, I just want to cite another well-known Chinese adage, “Women hold up half the sky.” This saying is intended to indicate that women are just as important as men in maintaining and keeping society ticking along. (It's an interesting saying coming from a manifestly patrilineal/patriarchal society.) But, given the domination by men and their complicity in actively subordinating women in so many situations, across all types of countries, all economic strata, and all political systems, I think the real group that holds up the other half of the sky is not men, as implied in the saying. It may actually be the children!

Now, maybe we need another seminar on “What Men Want.” But to make it the bookend to this seminar, a woman, not a man, should deliver that one!

I'm sure you have many questions, so let's get to them.

Q & A PERIOD

John: “Alivelu, do you want to make any commentary on this?”

Alivelu Ramisetty, Senior Global Gender Advisor: “The key to moving forward is not just making decisions for women, but rather consulting with them. Making them part of the overall thought and design is essential. Making an actual commitment, not a superficial commitment, is key. The programmatic part is very helpful. Thank you.”

Q: “One of the challenges you brought up at the end is the challenge to our own programming, our own thinking, and our own analysis. I think that, within the groups of people working on gender issues, there has been a discussion in the past year or two or three about the challenge of the current approach to the issue of feminism. There are two questions being asked. One is whether feminists need to review their approach in order for it to be more contextual to respond to where we are on some issues, and the fact that we haven't really moved on others. The other part of that is: You have a new generation that has a different

appreciation of these societal issues and whether you need a different type of feminism or different approach in order to think about that. Within that is the issue you brought up of the importance of including and deciding an appreciation for the issue of masculinity. For us as Oxfam, one of the things we've been talking about is: This is something that we must pay attention to because our experience with, for example, work on gender-based violence, is that you can get legislation around violence and you can make it punitive, etc. But changing a culture means challenging masculinity, i.e., what is the new masculinity that says, 'You are still a man, but you don't have to use coercion.' That there's a different ideal, a different model, especially in very traditional cultures. And if you don't approach and analyze the issues of masculinity within those cultures, you cannot have within your programs those elements that allow you to have those discussions, and then change behavior, culture, practice, and ideas about equality."

John: "Yeah, that's really important. We do need to look at the roots—not necessarily the prehistoric roots, we don't have to go that far back. But we need to look at the attitudes and the beliefs that tend to reinforce certain patterns of behavior. And that's why it was really important that Melida Guevara, the program officer in our El Salvador office who deals with the gender-based violence issues, developed a course on masculinity. She was working with the university to develop Masculinity Studies, because men are part of the solution as well as part of the problem, and we need to look at ways of involving them in this discussion. That's partly the critique that the gender and development people have of the women in development group, in that they didn't look at the gender issues, at the male part of the equation, well enough.

The contextualization of this is really important. Different societies are different. We are not all the same. We sometimes think that, 'Well, we're really all brothers and sisters,' but societies are *not* the same. Attitudes *are* different from place to place, and we need to recognize that. We need to develop strategies that recognize the different elements that underpin behavior in a particular context. And we need to understand the role of the state, and what you can do and what you can't do. A classic example that I like to give from a different field of development is the comparison between Myanmar and Indonesia. In the 1980s, if you wanted to study agriculture in Indonesia, 'You're welcome. Anybody can come in.' You want to study religion in Indonesia? 'No way, that's too political.' Over in Myanmar, you want to study religion in Myanmar? 'Please, come in.' You want to study agriculture? 'No, too political.' So, different places are really different, and we need to tailor-make our approaches to those contexts."

Q: "You say that the farther we are away from the revolution, women kind of lose power. Are you simply saying that as time goes on, the momentum is lost? Or are you actually saying that the movement can go backwards?"

John: "Well, I don't have a lot of experience with that. I've seen it in Vietnam, for example, and I've heard about it to some extent in Mozambique. During the revolution, women often rose quite quickly into positions of power, even in the

military. And after the revolution was over they occupied some important civilian and military positions. But society saw those crisis years as crisis events, not as things that were going to be used to systematically change position for women. Women might have liked to see it that way but, as time goes on, the mechanisms for bringing up a new generation of women that would assume important positions are not there. The crisis is past, and the crisis was used as the catalyst to help women gain these important positions. Then you find the women who were in those positions aging and eventually retiring, and nobody's replacing them except at a very junior level. So, it's almost like you're starting over again."

Q: "I'm curious if you think we're sophisticated enough as Oxfam to get the analysis right. We use the term 'women,' and some of the people in the room did a ROPE course this week where we talked about the importance of the words that we use. The example was 'community.' We've thrown it around as if all communities are the same. So with this example, 'women.' There are so many women, and myself, as a woman from the United States, I can't speak for women of the world. So, how can we really get to what women want, when it's so specific to who that woman is? Are we ready for that analysis? Can we do it?"

John: "I think we're not ready to do the analysis very well yet. I think we're ready to take on the recognition that we don't do it very well. I think we're at a point now where we've engaged with women's issues and gender issues to the point that we realize that we need to be more sophisticated. I'm not sophisticated enough to deal with all these issues. I do take this important point and I want to stress it: Women are very diverse. Men are very diverse. They have different hierarchies, different needs, different capabilities, and different contexts. We need to recognize that 'women' is not just a generic concept. It's not an operational concept. To make it operational we need to think about different types of women in different social situations, dealing with different kinds of men, and to do the analysis. So, what we need is not a sophistication in understanding; we need a sophisticated methodology to understand women. That's where we need to work with our learning and evaluation colleagues—to get more sophisticated analytical tools and framing—so we're asking better questions, digging deeper into underlying causes, and using a more sophisticated way of working with women. There are some legal issues that affect women more generally. Legal issues that affect a whole country, for example, affect all women and men regardless of their diversity and hierarchies. Then you mix in religion and the complexity of a problem that increases exponentially. And as I mentioned, it's not just religion; there are different branches of every religion, from conservative to liberal. There's a spectrum of beliefs within every religion, so we're dealing with a variety and diversity on multiple levels, shifting over time. The real question is, 'Do we have the sophistication of the tools to intervene, even if we understand the dimensions of the problem?' I think we potentially could. But we could be doing more harm than good if we're not careful. But I think we have to be realistic in

acknowledging that it's a lot more complicated than we wish it were, but it's an issue of complexity that's worth tackling."

Q: "Gender's much more diverse than it is sometimes thought about. It's not just women and men. So, has that been discussed at all in gender equality at Oxfam or in other nonprofits? Or is it seen as something that is more particular to the United States and not necessarily to other countries yet?"

John: "Well, the spectrum of genders is, as you say, quite wide. We haven't dealt with it, I'd say, in Oxfam that I know of. It was an issue that was dealt with quite a lot by the Ford Foundation in its sexual and reproductive health programs. They worked on gender identity issues quite a lot, especially supporting research on gender identity and its varieties. We haven't worked on that. It's probably not something we're going to spend a lot of effort on; it's difficult to get money for that. Ford Foundation could work on that because they don't have to fundraise. They have their own endowment. It's another issue that shows how complicated we are as humans. But that complexity also reinforces how important it is for us to work with people that we intend to help. Not just giving them things—we don't want a bunch of sewing machines. We want issues that people identify, that they negotiate, that they sometimes disagree over but come to some kind of consensus on about where we can intervene."

Q: "You also talked about time poverty. I was wondering, how do you see it in the current economy where gross domestic product is still based on the number of hours that people are working? Do you think that we are going to shift from measuring what is invisible on paid labor for those women and value their time properly?"

John: "I think a lot of the tasks that women perform are going to continue to not be paid. A lot of the reproductive roles and caregiving roles that women perform in many societies are not going to be paid in the near future. But that doesn't mean in some cases that we shouldn't be working on the time poverty issue. Going back to that example in Nepal, women are working 15 hours a day. They're interested in getting some help with that, right? Even if they're in isolated communities where there may not be a lot of opportunities to play new roles, if they got some help with some of the time poverty issues, just the ability to substitute working for leisure would be a huge benefit to them. But you've got to talk to them, and find out what their priorities are. I see time poverty as an issue, but maybe they'll say, 'I'm okay working 15 hours a day as long as I get more respect in the family.' Maybe that's the most important thing; I don't know."

John: "I'm serious when I say—well, it should be obvious—I'm not an expert. But I am an inveterate learner, so I really appreciate your comments and thoughts that come up. But please do read the paper that was attached to the invitation. That will provide the framework for additional comments you might have. Thanks again."

QUESTION FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- Many of the priorities women express are intangible: respect, dignity, appreciation, etc. How would you suggest we measure them, and how would you suggest getting those indicators to become a permanent part of program design?
- How would you suggest we approach conservative males on issues of women's status and rights?
- What religious texts can we refer to that actually promote improved status for women?



Joy Bryant (actress and designer, left) poses for a photo with Washington DC's Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (right) after lobbying for the STRIDE Act. *Keith Lane / Oxfam America*

10

Working with elites: an underused resource?

PREFACE

In this series we've gone through a whole variety of topics, and one of the natural sequels to talking about working with government is talking about working with elites. In Oxfam, we've traditionally worked mostly with other NGOs and NGO leaders, and our grants have gone primarily to NGOs and other forms of civil society. But that's not going to be sufficient if we think about the impact that we want to have. Who's got the most money out there to actually leverage? Well, it's not NGOs; it's governments, it's people's own resources, and it's corporations. They've got the resources that we really want to leverage for the poor, so we have to think about working with different constituencies than we've customarily worked with. Working with elites is one of those constituencies.

WHO ARE THE ELITES AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Who are the elites? Well, it covers a wide variety of spectrums. There are governmental elites, politicians (both civil servants as well as elected officials). You've got the captains of industry, the business leaders. Many of those people are active in politics as well, and/or are skilled lobbyists. We've got the whole raft of people from sports stars to fashionistas to television people to movies stars to preachers to financiers—all the people who make the news. There's a whole variety of folks out there that we can consider elites, but I'm not going to try to talk about that whole group of people. I'm going to talk about today mostly working with government elites, because I think they should be part of our programs.

Think about why elites are important. I'm thinking about Nancy Reagan. Remember Nancy Reagan had her astrologer? Who knows what astrological insight that person was putting into our public policy? Elites have interesting influences, and I think that part of our power analysis should look at not only which institutions are important, but also which particular people are important, as we think about where our potential intervention points are.

I'm going to talk about government folks, both civil servants and sitting politicians, today. I'm not exactly sure what to call an individual in this group. If you say "an elite," that's kind of awkward. "Big man," that's not gender-neutral. "Person in position of power" is too difficult to say. "Big Kahuna" is too specific to Hawaii. So, for lack of a better term, I'm going to call them "principals."

Here are some generalizations that I'm drawing from my experience, and this is not nearly sufficient for us to be able to put together a set of guidelines about working with elites. On the other hand, they are a few things that I've noticed in my experience working with elites. One of the axioms is that you have to be

pretty clear on what you want to get out of that relationship. Not everybody who is important is really important for us in the long term, so we really have to know what our *ask* is. Why do we want to be working with this person? What does this person have to offer us, potentially? And, if we think about it in cost-benefit terms, what's it going to cost us versus the benefit we could potentially get out of that? We have to think about the principal from their point of view, too. What does the principal want to get out of a relationship with us? That's equally important. And what is the principal's degree of freedom? By that I mean, what latitude does the principal actually have to operate, and what risk does the principal take in associating with us? We tend to think, first of all, of what kind of risk we take in associating with people in power. But we also have to think about, what kind of risk does the person in power take getting involved with us? Remember, if they are important people, they have to be political. They're either politicians, or they're sitting civil servants who control resources. And if you control resources, it's political. Anybody who is in a political position has enemies. We have to think about, from their perspective, what kinds of risks are they taking in getting involved in an overt way—a public way—with Oxfam? In some cases, it may be better for both of us to have the relationship very subdued, or at least not very visible. Elites may have enemies that would misuse that relationship against them. We may have friends that say, "No, you can't work with the elites." There are ideological as well as practical considerations for developing something.

When we think about whom we would potentially work with in our network of relationships, a person doesn't necessarily have to be a politician or the top decision-maker in a government agency. For example, it doesn't have to be the director general of an agency. Oftentimes it's the people at the director level, one notch below, that are really controlling most of the resources and how they are actually spent. And oftentimes directors can be key allies in the transformation of some kind of large government processes, because they do control a lot of resources. They usually control large numbers of staff and they're also somewhat powerful within the agency but less visible outside the agency. That sometimes works to our advantage.

COUNTRY MOUSE MEETS CITY MOUSE

We are the country mice; we are the unsophisticated people in this story. Most of the time, the elites we're talking about are very sophisticated people. They deal with politics all the time—they deal with in-fighting; they deal with resource and budget battles; they deal with personnel issues. But, I think we are the neophytes, and we need to tread carefully. One thing, though, is that when we think about working with sophisticated people, we have to do a little bit of power mapping—at least informally. We need to understand where that person sits. So,

we may be thinking about a particular agency, a government agency for example, and where it lies in regard to other agencies. As important as that is, there is another level of analysis that needs to go on. That is: How do the important people within our agency of interest fit with other actors who may be important? For example, I did a lot of work through Ford Foundation with the Irrigation Department, which is a division of the Ministry of Public Works, in Indonesia. To understand how we would transform the agency and give farmers more water rights, we had to understand not only how the Irrigation Department fit within the Ministry of Public Works, but also how the people who ran the Irrigation Department related to the director general of Public Works, to the Agriculture Ministry, and to the road-building department of the Ministry of Public Works. So, we had to understand some of those relationships.

When you can, you may want to try to develop some kind of a personal relationship with the elites. Meeting them just one time is not sufficient; you have to develop a situation where they get drawn into your ideas, where you meet frequently (whatever frequently means in your particular context). You want to try to develop that kind of a relationship. Obviously, one of the ways to build a relationship is through meetings. Now you might think, "Okay, what's so important about a meeting?" Well, there are a lot of interesting things about meetings that might not be immediately apparent. First of all, when do you arrive for a meeting? You need to arrive for a meeting 20 minutes early. Why? So that you can chat up the secretary, so you can chat up the aides. So many times when you're meeting someone important, actually the meeting doesn't happen, because the person gets called away or is running late. "I'm sorry. So-and-so is off at a meeting. He'll be back in five minutes." But he never comes back, or he gets called away. So how are you going to use that time? Well, you want to chat up people who are around that person, because they're going to have an influence on the principal. In fact, one way to change opinions is not just telling people or giving people a new idea, but having them hear that idea from multiple sources over a period of time. You want that idea to be coming from some of the important persons on the principal's staff. So, when you bring materials for the director of the department, bring another set for the secretary. And you want to honor the secretary and pay a lot of respect to him or her by giving her a set. You would be amazed at how far just that simple act will get you. Also, you have started to seed some of your ideas within a larger set of people close to the principal. It's also useful to use that time before the meeting with the principal to work with your own team. Sometimes you can use that as a chance to have your team practice the messaging with the aides or the secretary.

Another simple thing about meetings is to dress as nicely as you can. That might sound kind of stupid, but there's an attitude in a lot of NGOs that, "Well, we're NGOs. We dress simply; we dress for the field. I'm going to wear my cleanest dirty shirt for this meeting." Or, "I'm going to wear my good sweater, the one that only has one hole in the armpit;" your field sweater has holes in both armpits.

What are you actually saying if you dress down? You're actually saying, without intending it maybe, "I'm a field person and you're not. I have information that you don't have. And I'm bona fide or genuine, and you're not." It can oftentimes be interpreted that way. But by dressing nicely, you're respecting the person and his office. Good clothes yield better treatment. It's the little things.

At the meeting itself, don't give the principal a whole big stack of Oxfam stuff, or of anybody else's stuff. If you're going to give him something, give him something thin that he might actually read. If you have other heavy materials that you want to give to the principal, give them to the principal's aide. Anything you really want the person to make a decision on should be in a form that's decision-ready, like a one-page brief that's got the key issues that you want to move forward with.

These meetings can be really important. For example, when Ray and I met with Prime Minister Zenawi Meles of Ethiopia, we had a message on water management programs, small-scale irrigation, and agricultural development. We wanted the Government of Ethiopia to invest more in this work. We thought we were going to get 15-20 minutes; we got an hour and a half. So, we were really lucky. Then, we didn't hear anything more about it. But, lo and behold, by the next year the budget for that was doubled. We don't know how much of it was directly as a result of this meeting, but we know that the PM was really interested in the topic and suddenly we see the budget double. These are the things that are difficult to do monitoring and evaluation on, but they can sometimes have an amazing result.

TURNABOUT'S FAIR PLAY

One of the things that we want to think about is: We have in our minds how we want to help the principal help us, but we should also have in our minds how that principal may want to use us. It's important to know whether you're going to be on television, for example. When Abera, our country director in Ethiopia, warned me that when I met the president—not the prime minister, but the president of Ethiopia—it was going to be aired on television. I had to practice what I was going to say for a television audience before going into that meeting. Those are the types of things that you want to know in advance. You also want to know if you're going to be used for any propaganda. In some countries, it may not just be an innocent meet and greet, filling time on an otherwise poorly staffed television program. There may be some kind of effort or propaganda message behind that, and you need to figure out what that is and be prepared for it.

It's always good to have another issue in your back pocket when you're meeting somebody. When we met the president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, we wanted to see if there was going to be an opportunity to discuss our *accord de siège*, which is a document that allows us duty-free import privileges and a variety of

other exemptions (essentially diplomatic status). The application for the accord had been going on for a long time, but we didn't know where it stood exactly. So, we came to a point in our discussions where it seemed possible to broach the subject, and I did. Suddenly, President Wade said, "Oh, now I know why you are here." Well, it wasn't why we were there at all, but it was an opportunity that sometimes happens. He ordered, "Bring me that file," and aides started scurrying all around him, and we had that accord de siège in three days. So, have something else to bring to the table if the opportunity presents itself.

One of the things that I've found is that people in really important positions oftentimes want to hear information directly from the field, because in their normal situation they don't get good information. People are afraid to tell them bad news so they hear lots of good news. You can imagine being a president of a country and there's a project that is far away from the capital. As each report goes up the line, the news gets a little bit better. A terrible project becomes a bad project in the report. The bad project becomes a not-so-good project; the not-so-good project becomes an okay project; the okay project becomes a pretty good project. By the time the reports have gone up to the president (if the president ever sees it), the bad project has become a great project. I've found that honest people in important positions are really hungry for the truth, because they know garbage when they see it. So, you have to decide before you go into a meeting, how much truth are you going to let out? Because you're protecting other relationships as well; you may be working with that ministry, or you may be working with people who are trying to make the project better or who are trying to reform things, even though they still need a lot of work. You have to decide beforehand, "If I'm going to get into this topic, how much information am I going to let out? How am I going to protect the people I have to work with all the time as well as potentially get something done by working with this principal?" It's not easy.

Another thing that I've found is that people in high positions really have a sense of humor, yet people are afraid to crack jokes with them. I, fortunately or unfortunately, am not afraid to crack jokes. You have to be comfortable in your own skin if you're going to go down that route. You probably don't want to try out new material. "Did you hear the one about the three prime ministers who went into a bar?" Probably not. You probably don't want to go there.

If you want to get involved with the very highest levels of societies in a society or a country, you could use up a lot of political capital. Let me give you an example about going overboard. In early 1989, when I was a new program officer with the Ford Foundation in Indonesia, Ford held the meeting of the board of trustees in Jakarta. That was an absolute nightmare! First of all, the people on the board of trustees in the Ford Foundation are themselves very powerful, and they are used to meeting with other powerful people. The Ford directors decided in their infinite wisdom that they would split into three groups: one group went to China, where they met Premier Li Peng. A second group went to the Philippines, where they

met President Corazon Aquino. The last group went to Thailand, where they met the king of Thailand. After they landed in Indonesia they split into two groups: One group went to Yogyakarta, where that group met the sultan; the other group went to Bali. Finally, they reconvened in Jakarta for the meeting, where a subset of the group met with President Suharto. You can imagine how much political capital we used up in all four of those countries to get those meetings. I'm not sure it was all worth it; then again, it might have been. These things are difficult to measure—what meeting those people really meant. But I think, at the end of the day, it probably was worth it, because it established our bona fides in those countries in ways that were difficult to establish in other ways.

The other thing that I've also found is that a lot of top leaders relish a good argument. They like you to present opinions that may not be popular, that they may not be hearing from their own staff. For example, in northern Sri Lanka when the civil war was still going on, I was working for CARE at the time and we met with Thamilchelvan, who at the time was the political commissar of the LTTE. The LTTE is the group that brought you the suicide bomber, and they were considered a terrorist group by the US government. We met with Thamilchelvan, and we got into this discussion about independence and freedom, about what it meant for a territory to be independent. And he defined independence as autarchy—basically, “we're completely self-contained; we don't have to get or give anything from anybody, we can be completely self-sufficient.” I said, “Well, another definition of independence would be ‘a state of having many friends’.” He didn't reject that, and he got real thoughtful. I think that was a win. He didn't have to change his opinion in front of me, but you could see that it got him thinking.

In working with elites, I found it very valuable to occasionally criticize the US government. A lot of times, people don't really believe that, if you're an NGO, you're not in the pocket of the CIA or the pocket of the US government. It doesn't matter if you tell them you don't get any money from the US government; they still think you're controlled by the government. There was a workshop in Vietnam when I was with Ford Foundation on the 40- or 50-year anniversary of the ASEAN. I wrote a piece for that workshop that indirectly was highly critical of US policy toward ASEAN. When he read the draft of my paper the minister of foreign affairs suddenly moved me way up in the agenda, from the sixth speaker to the second speaker. You don't want to go around bashing the US irresponsibly, but there are a lot of responsible ways to bash the US. The US is an easy target. I found that this usually evokes a pretty good response.

We found it helped our credibility when you take the country's side on an issue, like in the case of Ethiopia, we were working on the coffee patents issue. Starbucks had taken over the names of Yirgacheffe and Sidamo (which are place names in Ethiopia that are famous for growing coffee), and they tried to patent the names for their own reasons. We took Ethiopia's side in that intellectual property battle, and that really earned us a lot of praise and a lot of goodwill.

When we met with Prime Minister Meles, he personally thanked us for that assistance. These things come to the attention of people in high places.

One other thing about meeting with high-placed people: Always bring intellectual gifts—maps, books, pamphlets, anything like that—especially if it's something that's not that common. It really builds a lot of goodwill, because it's not like a corporate gift; it's not like a silver tea set or something that borders on a bribe. But people in high positions really appreciate that. When I was getting ready to do my dissertation research in Sumatra, I found these 19th-century topographic maps of that area in Cornell's library, in the basement of the Echols Collection. And Indonesians didn't know this series existed. It was large-scale, 1:20,000 scale maps, topographic, and made from 1875-1890. I eventually got the whole set, and gave the whole series to a variety of people. I got it digitized. When I first arrived in 1984, you had to get permission from the commissioner of the Sociopolitical Division of the government on where you could do your research. I gave him one of these maps, and we talked for a long time about it. Then he said, "So where do you want to do your work?" And I said, "Well, I don't know yet, but it could be anywhere." And he said, "Okay, anywhere." He gave me permission to do it anywhere I wanted in the province.

A couple of other things for dealing with important people: Never lose your cool. I think the time I got most angry was with the deputy minister of education in Afghanistan under the Taliban period. What was the topic? Girls' education. I was seething inside, because his argument was, "It's not the time for women's or girls' education; we have to win the war first. Then maybe we'll discuss women's education." Well, this was really difficult to stomach, but I kept my cool and (this is when I was working with CARE), we continued with our program of village education. Even under the Taliban, 23,000 kids were in school; 46 percent of them were girls. We managed to continue that program up until the last days of the Taliban government. The key was having village schools owned by the villages.

Just a couple of final things: Be careful about asking very high-level people for advice, because if you ask them for advice, they're going to give it, and you may not want to hear what they have to say. Be especially careful in public forums, especially if it's being taped or televised; it becomes part of the public record. So, you have to kind of know in advance or guess in advance where the person stands on some issues that are important, and whether you actually want to go down that route.

Another issue in dealing with elites is: You have to be aware of how long that person is going to be in a position of power. In India this was a huge problem, because the Indian Administrative Service officers (which is composed of people from the crème de la crème of Indian society. They get about 200,000 applicants for about 25 positions each year) are often only in place for six months to a year before they move to another district. So, you have to be aware of how long a person's going to be in a particular position. When you think about how you're

going to influence that person and the person who replaces that person, you have to work extensively with a coterie of aides, assistants, and deputies, because they're the ones that are going to be in place for a longer time. They're going to be the ones that transmit knowledge.

Final notes: If you can get these principals out to the field to actually see work in the field, it's always worth it. It's amazing how people never get to the field, or they never get to the field with anybody except their own officers, who are trying to present a particular Potemkin village. (Potemkin was an officer under Peter the Great. Catherine, Emperor Josef II of Austria, and King Poniatowski of Poland wanted to make a tour of the southern lands to see how the peasants were faring. Potemkin had people building houses and sprucing up the villages one by one just before the royalty arrived.) But principals who are honest don't want to see the showcase places; they really want to see the real work. There's a whole formal literature on how to structure a field visit to make it worthwhile—how many stops to make, how long to sit in the car, how much walking, whether you do it before or after the workshop.

A lot of times, if you're using a translator (as I had to do a lot in Vietnam), work with the translator before you meet the principal. That translator is so important. I was in Poland in 1978 for New Year's Day staying with some Polish friends. Jimmy Carter was visiting Warsaw, and his normal Polish translator was sick, so they had a Russian translator who also spoke Polish pretty well. When Jimmy Carter said, "Americans love the Polish people," it came out in Polish, "Americans lust for the Polish people." When I brought high-level Vietnamese delegations over to the US, I always worked with the translator before to make sure that he understood concepts and principles, as well as the details of the trip. It may seem like a little thing, but you'd be surprised at how easy it is to turn love into lust.

I'm going to leave it at that. There are a lot of little things that you have to think about, in terms of logistics. When I was with the Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Khanh in New York, we had three vans: two big, black Chevy Blazers with armored everything and guys with shotguns, and then we had a privately hired van that I was in with some other people. I said to the driver, "Keep up with the car!" And we're going through red lights, we're going up onto the sidewalk—the lead van wouldn't stop, even at red lights, for security reasons. So, I said to our driver, "Keep up with them," because I had to be there to usher the principal into the appointments. At the end of the day, he said, "Don't call me tomorrow." His nerves were shattered. You can get some pretty interesting adventures in working with elites.

Q & A PERIOD

Q: “I just wanted to point out that, these days, most of these elites probably have Facebook accounts and Twitter, etc. The president of Haiti has a YouTube channel. If you’re able to make an online connection, then—let’s say the subject of Extractive Industries comes up, for example—that may be a way for you to share a link or share another perspective. You probably wouldn’t be doing that as Oxfam, but as an individual that’s this whole other space for getting our message across, and learning about what they’re interested in.”

John: “That’s a really good point. Not only for learning what they’re interested in, but learning how they think, how they present material, or what doesn’t appear on some of those Facebook accounts that you think should. The more you understand about the way that person thinks, the more you understand about the way the person defines the problem, and the more you understand about the way the person thinks about solutions, the better you’re going to be able to tailor your own message and serve that person’s own development. One of the things I’ve found was that, working with technical people—foresters, irrigation people, agriculturalists—you’re dealing with issues of bureaucratic transformation as well as personal conversion. You really have to understand how those agencies operate. How do they get their incentives? What drives those particular people. They didn’t want to work with farmers. So you have to understand some of that mentality, and figure out a way to make it relevant.”

Q: “What would be your advice during very crucial periods, like election periods, as times when you approach those types of elites?”

John: “Campaigns are really tricky. Political campaigns are tricky. This topic used to come up a lot when I was with CARE, and they said, ‘But we’re not a political organization. How do we talk about laws and rights?’ And I said, ‘We don’t get involved in who gets elected. Once they’re elected, we care deeply about what they do and how their actions relate to people living in poverty.’ So, in that sense I think we’re pretty clear. But during the election campaign itself, we have to be real careful, because we don’t want to get involved even accidentally in a political campaign. That’s something we want to stay away from.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- How would you handle an elite who is entirely against your work?
- What would you suggest that INGOs do when working with local elites to avoid being used as a pawn in the elites’ own strategies?
- What are the pros and cons of forming an overall advising group at country level for your programs? E.g., an all-Ethiopian working group to provide

advice on the shape and direction of your program? Such a group would almost certainly contain some elites, and such a group would certainly need to deal with external elites.



The Paraisópolis favela (Paradise City shanty town) in São Paulo, Brazil borders the affluent district of Morumbi.
Tuca Vieira / Oxfam

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**Is there still a 'North'
and a 'South?'**
**Reflections on the
globalization of
opportunity and
marginalization**

PREFACE

How to describe our world? How to paint it in terms of poverty and politics, and in a way that stresses also our commitment to neutrality? This has always been something of challenge. The term Third World has stuck for some, but for others it seems anachronistic. Today we talk about the North (or Global North), and the Global South. The Global South is the most recent incarnation of our tortured attempts to describe the income-challenged countries in which we do most of our work. If you recall, some of the past efforts to describe those countries have included: poor nations, underdeveloped nations, newly emerging nations, least-or less-developed countries, less-industrialized countries, developing countries, Third World, or modernizing countries. All of these have various biases built into them, and we're not going to find any perfect terminology. But you get the idea. Each of these monikers is trying to conjure up an image of countries that are lacking something or that are trying to catch up to richer, more industrialized, more developed, more modern countries—whatever developed or modern means; that's a whole debate in itself. In any case, these countries generally have some combination of significant poverty, poor infrastructure, challenged opportunity horizons, weak governance structures, nascent or weakly developed administrative capacity, weak rule of law, inequitable internal allocation and ownership of resources, etc. Such nations may also be involved in some internal or international armed conflict, which further complicates their prospects for sustained development.

NEW FORMS, NEW FORCES

We're going to continue to face challenges with accurately describing and differentiating poor countries, because they're becoming more diverse internally. They're showing an increasing variety in terms of types of poverty. Another term we may want to touch on is *G-77*. This term is used to refer to the so-called Non-Aligned Movement, which is a political grouping, not an economic descriptor. You get countries as diverse as Malaysia, Mauritania, Marshall Islands, Morocco, and Myanmar together in a group of 77, so that doesn't help us very much. Actually, now your Jeopardy question is: How many countries are members of the *G-77*? The answer is not 77; the answer is 132. You can see, the idea of a Non-Aligned Movement spread, but they didn't want to change the name for every new member state that joined. So, it's 132 in the *G-77*.

We've also got the term *BRICSAM*—Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and Mexico—which collectively contain 3 billion of the world's 7 billion inhabitants. Soon, we may have to add countries like Indonesia.

What do the *BRICSAM* countries have in common? On average, they've broken into the ranks of middle-income countries. But then, averages don't mean a

whole lot to a hungry person. BRICSAM countries also still have large numbers of poor people. In fact, today, in terms of absolute numbers, more people live in the so-called middle-income countries than in the poor countries. In India, for example, there's a middle class of an estimated 300 million to 400 million people. That leaves the other 650 million to 700 million people as poor. India has more than half the number of poor people in the world, and yet it also exhibits many of the characteristics of much richer countries in terms of its administrative capacity, industrial development, infrastructure, resource space, and military capability. In fact, some would argue that it is precisely these resources and capabilities that we could seek to bring to bear on the problems of poverty.

So, what's been happening between the BRICSAM countries (and other up and comers like Indonesia) and the more developed world? The situation certainly looked very different some decades ago. First, the gap in life expectancy between the BRICSAM and the advanced industrialized countries (let's call them that for the moment) has been narrowing rapidly even as the absolute gap in income has continued to grow enormously. This is going to become an even more pronounced trend in the future, so we're no longer going to see much difference in life expectancy between BRICSAM countries and richer and more developed countries. For example, if we look at the life expectancy in the United States, it's about 77 years. In Indonesia now, it's 71 years. You can see how the gap is really narrowing rapidly. People in BRICSAM will still be poor but they will live longer and perhaps even healthier, a phenomenon that presents other challenges.

Fertility rates in BRICSAM countries are already low, approaching those of the US. In fact, in China and Russia they are below replacement level. Each person entering life is getting more attention and more resources invested in him or her, and better health care. In most places, a woman doesn't have to have five children any more so that three will survive.

A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

Government investment policies have had a major impact in how poverty manifests itself. Let's compare two large developing countries, Indonesia and Nigeria. Both are OPEC countries. Both have large populations. But how is all that oil money invested? During the last 40 years, Indonesia invested heavily in seven key areas: distributed electrical power, denser telecommunication networks, denser road networks, air transport, agriculture (especially irrigated rice agriculture), universal education (including tertiary education), and rural health clinics. While Indonesia is famous for corruption, even after all the skimming and rent-seeking there was a lot of real investment in the poor. And the investment was spread across the whole country. In fact, if there's a tragic

element in the Indonesian story, it's not that nothing happened; it's that so much more could have happened, had there been less corruption.

Now let's look at Nigeria. It did not share the wealth or make many productive investments in the country to the same degree that Indonesia did. In fact, there is still an active rebellion in the delta of the Niger River, in part caused by a dispute over revenue and access to oil resources. Nigeria did not make the same kind of investments in physical or social infrastructure as Indonesia did. Its leaders are presumed to have hidden large amounts of money in foreign bank accounts, and to have made extravagant purchases of foreign land and housing. I don't know if you do, but I still get those SPAM letters from the "widow of General Abacha," trying to rope me into some scheme supposedly to unlock ill-gotten money hidden away in some foreign bank account. These scams rely on the perception that Nigeria's leaders have hidden away vast stores of wealth.

What was the result of this different pattern of investment between these two OPEC countries? By 2010, Indonesia's per capita income had gone from half of Nigeria's 40 years ago to almost two-and-a-half times Nigeria's. In other words, there was a fivefold increase in Indonesia's income compared to Nigeria's over that 40-year period. Life expectancy went up 17 years in Indonesia, but only improved six years during the same period in Nigeria.

What's going on? I think we have increasing differentiation across poor countries. You find that government investment patterns do matter. Where governments choose to put their resources really does have an impact on welfare and well-being. When we talk about poor countries, we have to increasingly talk about not just income levels, or income per capita or purchasing power parity per capita; we have to look at what kind of institutions and policies those governments are following to get an idea of where they're headed into the future, and how that might affect people living in poverty.

DEVELOPING COUNTRIES ON INEQUALITY

So, there's increasing differentiation across the group that we call "poor countries." But there's also a kind of hybridization happening; countries are becoming more like each other in different ways. In some ways rich countries are becoming more like poor countries, and poor countries are becoming more like rich countries on many dimensions. Some countries have been growing very fast, especially in Asia—even some of the poor countries in Asia. I think governments in Asia are generally development-minded. That is, despite sometimes high levels of corruption and greed, Asian governments still generally feel that they have responsibility for the welfare of the people. I think it would be a good research project to look at a country's rate of growth and how it scores on governance dimensions. In fact, the whole Millennium Challenge Corporation

idea of the US government was predicated on the notion that we should reward with our foreign assistance countries that have good governance and are making the right investment choices. We believe they would have higher rates of growth using our money if they are practicing good governance.

Going a little further back in time, we could also examine the case of Sri Lanka. The Kuznets Curve looks at things like income levels and well-being. Kuznets posited a path that plotted most of the countries in the world along something of a curve. As you might expect, those with higher income levels had higher life expectancy. That was generally true, but one country jumped out as having much higher life expectancy than you would expect from its income levels. That was Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). This anomaly is explainable if you look at what the Sri Lankan government was doing in 1948 when it was newly independent. It invested heavily in education and in health facilities. Tragically they could not keep up this momentum. Here's another case of a country that tragically followed a poor political path. The social policies of the dominant Sinhalese majority excluded Tamils, which was a major factor leading to the dissection of the country and the ensuing civil war. In fact, just after World War II when they were deciding in 1948 (I think) where to put the Asian Development Bank, they had several candidates. The Philippines was one; Sri Lanka was another; I've forgotten where the third was; and the fourth was, of all places, Myanmar, because at that time Myanmar was exporting both rice and oil, and English was well-spoken. It had good educational infrastructure. It seemed like it was going to be an up-and-coming country. We can see how badly things turned out for Myanmar, based on terrible government policies.

Asia's been growing a lot, and the dense markets in Asia have helped government provide services. It helps to have a lot of people in concentrated areas, because it helps markets work. It's not always as easy to build markets in places like Africa where the population is more spread out. You have greater distances, and that tends to be a problem in terms of helping markets develop. Long stretches of road or railway are needed for that. (By the way, it's interesting how the World Bank seems to never fund railway projects. Why is that? They're always funding road projects but not railways. Sounds like a good investigative research project for someone.)

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

Among the so-called Third World, we have an increasing differentiation of countries. You now have what might be called Fourth and Fifth Worlds. You've got the DRC, South Sudan, Laos, and Haiti. It's not easy to lump them in with some of the other poor countries that are a little bit more stable, have better governance processes, and possibly have more opportunities. I think we're also finding a process of hybridization. By this I mean: It doesn't matter if the country

is rich or poor, or how rich or how poor—they're being influenced by each other. Nobody is pure anymore (well, nobody was ever pure, at least since Adam and Eve!). Local systems are changing as rapidly now as they had to during the onset of the colonial period. Everybody now is bound up with everybody else, through the spread of common technical, managerial, and belief systems. We're all bound together by common banking and investment rules, and by increased trade dependency through the reduction of tariffs and transportation costs. When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, an imported item was a big deal. It was a big deal to have something made in Europe. It was equally a big deal to have something made in Japan. And now we've got common Internet and phone services, shared TV shows. We've got some universally shared tastes: music and movie favorites (and here we're not just talking Western movies; Bollywood is huge). We've got shared fashion. There's been some (albeit very slow) acceptance of new norms regarding women, gays, and human rights.

I have a story about our shared music heritage. I remember going to Hoi An with my family in 1997 for a vacation (we were living in Hanoi at the time). Hoi An is a 17th-century Portuguese entrepôt on the coast of Vietnam, and some of the houses are basically the same as they were in the 17th century. You can't imagine a more quaint and, in some ways, timeless setting. As we walked down the main street not one, not two, but three of the little inns were blaring out the Eagles' "Hotel California." So, the universalization of shared tastes is happening. But I can guarantee you that the Eagles are not getting any revenue from the Hoi An hotbed of its music.

Back to the more serious. We've got the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which tries individuals charged with war crimes or crimes against humanity. That wouldn't have been possible 40 years ago. And by the way, is the United States party to the International Court of Justice? No! We invoke our warped sense of American exceptionalism once again: "We'll use our own laws to deal with our own." So, America definitely needs to work on joining these shared systems. We've got a whole set of organizations that are trying to promote global values, like Transparency International on corruption. We've got groups promoting ethical consumerism, organic farming, and low-carbon-footprint living. Even if imperfect, we've got a United Nations, and an African Union. We have made some major strides in developing global institutions.

America is still somewhat isolated, but you can't imagine how insular we used to be. Just go back to the 1950s and 1960s when I was young. I grew up in Denver, Colorado. The only ethnic food you could get was Chinese. Chinese chop suey and a fortune cookie was the best we could manage at the time. The international fashions that made it to Denver were the short-lived Nehru jacket and Madras plaid shirts. There was no reggae or other world music. There were no yoga, hardly even any yoghurt, no fresh tropical fruits, no Indian curries, no ceviche or crème brûlée. Back then, you couldn't even get fresh fruits or vegetables in the winter; everything was canned. You can't imagine how

revolutionary Ravi Shankar and his sitar, Bob Marley, Taco Bell, and Pier 1 Imports were.

So, in some sense, we're all becoming hybridized. We're busy grafting other cultures onto our own. But each graft is only a partial graft. We're not creating clones; we're creating lots of diverse combinations. There's enough superficial homogenization that we now pretend that we can speak a common language. Underneath, I think, we're still far apart on a lot of issues. Some of those things that on the surface may be bringing us together but have not been resolved underneath are certainly things like religion and core societal values. If we look at the philosophical roots of Al Qaeda, for example, we see that the West is a presumed enemy of the cultural values of Islam, or at least some interpretations of Islam. That's a rallying cry to mobilize against so-called Western values.

In 1992, the political scientist Samuel Huntington gave a lecture titled *The Clash of Civilizations* that was turned into a book four years later. In it he argues that the westernization and modernization as conceived by Western-influenced societies has been undermining traditional and revered values in the Islamic world. Liberals at the time attacked his work, claiming that it was too categorical in its interpretation of political and social processes, and that we were not getting ready to go to war over some cultural divide. At the time, I think that was a good critique, but we see that Samuel Huntington's arguments probably have more value if you look at the way that Al Qaeda has proceeded since that time. It's worthwhile to read the whole article; it's in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. There's another article that came out in the September 1990 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* by Bernard Lewis, who's a famous scholar of Islam, titled "The Roots of Muslim Rage." In that article, I think, is where he introduced the term *clash of civilizations*. The point is, as nations we're getting closer together in many ways (which sometimes draws charges of religious or cultural imperialism), but we're also becoming further apart on other dimensions, as some countries lag further and farther behind economically. Some groups cling to certain values, while others change.

I think the range and diversity of coalitions is expanding. I'm still going to need help to determine where on the continuum of hybrid culture to place "Gangnam Style!"

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OXFAM'S PROGRAMS?

If countries are increasingly becoming hybrids, advancing on some dimensions but lagging in others, then the challenge for us is definitely to think about how to intervene effectively. One poor country is not the same as another poor country, if it ever was. A country may have a rapidly growing economy but very weak

institutions, like Myanmar right now for example. Another country with the same average income level as Myanmar, Pakistan, once had strong institutions that are now under assault. Nigeria, India, and Vietnam have about the same GDP per capita as one another. Thailand, China, and Turkmenistan have about the same income per capita as one another, as well as Angola and Jamaica. Iraq and Indonesia have about the same per capita income. But wealth is spread very differently, and the institutions that hold society together are also very different. So, our programming has to be adjusted accordingly. I think that we have to look at the types of institutions each country has to guide us in our choice of programming interventions. Clearly, GDP or GDP per capita, or even adjusted GDP per capita, is not going to provide much guidance.

One last attempt at labeling for today: How about the term *fragile states*? Is that a valuable classifier? We talk about increasing our programming interventions in fragile states. Civil war or other major internal or external strife seem to be one commonly accepted feature in identifying a fragile state. A question might be: “Would we program the same way in Afghanistan as we would in the Congo?” Both are fragile states. I don’t know the DRC very well, but knowing something about Afghanistan my guess would be, probably not. I’m not sure if lessons from one of those countries would be that valuable for the other country, so I’m a little bit skeptical about what the term fragile states does for us. We have to break it down into the level of institutions to understand which institutions to work with, and what kind of instability or fragility we’re dealing with, before we can decide where our best points of intervention will be.

I think that all of this points to the importance of locally crafted strategic plans at country- or sub-country levels. We have to take into account the specific character of available resources, their ownership, and the cultural, economic, and political governance institutions that hold society together. I think there’s some heavy lifting for us ahead at Oxfam. All this talk about power essentially leads us to examine power analysis. Duncan Green at Oxfam Great Britain is going to be spending quite a bit of his energies in this next phase looking at power analysis—power economics, power politics—and trying to help us understand the origin and nature of power. Just what is it that makes society tick, what keeps it together, what levers could we pull to influence society in a pro-poor direction? I think this should be a major part of the agenda for the Program Development Groups and the Program Governance Groups for the country teams.

Finally, it’s amazing how you can fly to a poor country and the airports look just about the same everywhere. You get in a taxi. The taxi may be better or worse, but pretty much the same. It brings you to a hotel, which is pretty much the same as everywhere else. I joke with people. They say, “Oh, you’re so lucky. You get to go to Europe all the time with the Global Team.” And I say, “Yeah, and I’ve concluded after exhaustive research that the fluorescent lights in Belgium are the same as the fluorescent lights in America.” Oftentimes, I just see a country’s meeting rooms. Superficially, there’s so much that’s now the same that you can

be lulled into think that things are the same underneath, too; that people somehow have the same beliefs as you do because the external (the housing, the wine, the food, etc.) looks so similar. But underneath those similarities, people do have different goals and aspirations. They have different ideas about how society is supposed to function. We have to continue to take note of that diversity and, as I've argued before, one of the key things that we have to do is talk to people. Not just the men, not just the women; but sometimes the children, too. Not just people that are easy to access, but people that are difficult to get to. Not just people who are visible outside the house, but sometimes people in the back rooms. We have to continue to work to identify people who might otherwise be excluded, listening to their stories, and figuring out what their goals and aspirations are. Through that, we can be more effective in identifying what kind of formal and informal institutions we need to strengthen.

But all of our categorizations and attempts at generalization still leave us with the conclusion that things are still damn complicated, and we have to deal with it. That's my soapbox for today; I can open it up for questions.

Q & A PERIOD

Q: "What I think you've been talking about is challenging to me because now in our campaigns work we have a priority of being somewhat partner-driven and partner-guided. We're looking for ways in which that can bear some fruit, and what you say here reminds me a little bit of our campaign on subsidy reform and cotton. That campaigning on making trade fair had a very clear applicability to a certain set of nations, but in some ways it was not applicable to some of the other interests that we had in our regions. Sometimes there was some confusion and sometimes there was misunderstanding of where we put our priorities in terms of our advocacy work. I wonder if what you've talked about today could have some application or some recommendations as we deal with this idea of driving our campaign work through the concerns of our national and regional programs, and the challenges that we may face."

John: "We do have some challenges. First of all, any time you deal with policy, you are dealing with a blunt instrument. It works for some groups and it doesn't work well for some other groups. Even a supposedly good policy will sometimes hurt groups of people that we would normally not want to touch, or that we would normally think about trying to help. So, policy does have costs, and I think one of the key issues is how we develop our policy positions. We often claim that they're partner-driven or partner-led. Again, if you look at the diversity of situations that exist out there that a policy would be applied over, it's sometimes difficult to decide which partner to talk to. Partners have different ideas; partners are not homogeneous, even in the same country. They have some different aspirations. We've seen in the case of El Salvador with the violence against women program

how politically charged selecting partners is because NGOs have roots that go back to the civil wars.

It is a challenge for us to decide which kind of partners to work with. We should be comfortable that any policy that we're going to promote will produce more good than harm, but we have to recognize that it probably will cause some harm, because the world is diverse enough that nothing is going to apply equally well in all cases.

Q: "I have a stakeholder engagement question. You were talking about the interdependency or the interconnectedness of states. In the context of weak governance, where do you see the role of transnational corporations and international finance systems and other entities that might be outside but also embedded in the country, for problems and solutions?"

John: "Well there's a lot of discussion about that, about how we deal with these transnational actors that are on the one hand presumably regulated by the state, but in many cases they are not very regulated at all, and they act as independent entities. For a radical version of that line of reason, you can read David Korten's *When Corporations Rule the World*. In it he develops this idea of corporations as pretty much a law unto themselves. My son is an author; he's writing a three-volume book about a post-apocalyptic United States, where the governments of the US and other places have collapsed, and corporations are duking it out for supremacy. So, this is not an isolated thought that people have, that corporations are gaining more power than they really should have.

I don't think we know how to deal with corporations very well. Recently, the US Supreme Court has judged that corporations can be treated as individuals, as legal entities on a personal level. This is really going to provoke a reexamination of some of our strategies. When you think about our campaigning work, we've dealt with certain commodities; we've dealt with governments, like with Making Trade Fair; we've dealt with companies when we've tried to get a better deal for local producers, like when we worked with Starbucks in Ethiopia. But in terms of global campaigns, I'm not sure we have that much experience working with companies. And I'm not sure we fully know what it would take, or how we can fully deal with companies. What would it take for us to engage with Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, or some of the giant grain and commodity transportation outfits? I think it would take more resources than we've been able to muster up until this time, and I don't have an answer for you on that one. But you're right; we are interconnected. Non-state actors—international and global actors like corporations—are important, and we may have to engage with them more.

Q: "Is there a 'South' in the South? Because apparently in West Africa, political scientists have discovered that every country in West Africa has its 'North.' And 'North' is usually a problem area. You notice for instance, in Mali, it's the North. In Nigeria, you have the Boko Haram area in the North. The Ivory Coast war was due to rebellion in the North. Then, apparently the map of poverty is worse when

it comes to the North. Even Senegal has its 'North.' Even if the gap between the international North and the South is reducing in terms of opportunities and high-tech or whatever, there is another 'South' in the South. From the Oxfam perspective, it is like we are addressing the 'South' of the South in terms of our rights-based approach and mission. Now, some actors will perceive Oxfam as being part of the 'North' of the South, because we operate mostly from cities. What I'm saying does not contradict the whole issue you exposed, but it does underline some of the specificities. West Africa is known to be lagging behind in terms of development in general. In terms of conceptualizing our work, be it on policy, advocacy, or field activities, we have to clarify: what is the 'South' in the South? ”

John: “I think I need a compass to find my way through your comment, but you are right, there are areas of the 'South' that are further marginalized. They are those parts of the countries that are least developed; they have the fewest resources invested in them by the government; they're often marginalized because of their ethnicity, their distance, or their value to the national economy. Take, for example, the northeast part of India, western Nepal, the northern parts of the countries that you mentioned near the Sahara Desert, or the High Andes. Physical isolation, cultural distance, and low economic contribution to the national economy—these are often characteristics of the 'South within the South.' And when we think about how to work with those people, you're right; we often have a double challenge, because we're often thinking about national institutions which may themselves be very weak and in some cases actively biased against those regions. How we work with those institutions on behalf of the most marginalized people is a challenge for us, and I'm glad you brought that up.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- Would we program differently in a country that is labeled as part of “the Global South” compared to the way we develop programs in “Southern” regions of hybrid countries?
- Do international institutions, such as the International Criminal Court and The Hague, promote unity in thinking, or are they outliers that will gradually fade away?
- What kinds of relationships do you envision between a Southern country and customary or statutory law in the country? How can NGOs influence this relationship? Should they attempt to influence this relationship at all?



A bamboo grove in Bali, Indonesia. "A problem can seem simple... but when you dig deeper, it can be complicated." *John Ambler*

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What's really
important about
qualitative data?

PREFACE

Data, data everywhere and not a drop to drink! We are besieged by data. We are inundated by it.

Qualitative data, quantitative data. Sometimes we haven't even thought through why we need all the data we collect. So, I want to explore that topic with you a little bit today. It bears a lot on what people accept as valid evidence. We at Oxfam tend to be more comfortable with qualitative data than with the tools of the physical sciences, engineering, or mathematics. We sometimes think of ourselves as social scientists, but if you look at what's happened with the social sciences in the United States and elsewhere over the past 30 or 40 years, social sciences are becoming increasingly quantitative. Values are assigned, scales are constructed. The numbers are then washed through complicated statistics, and the result appears very quantitative and somehow scientific. If you look at any major peer-reviewed social science journal today, you'll see how quantitative the articles have become. Demography is an extreme case; it all seems to be summation signs, things in parentheses to the x power, and very complicated mathematics. Economics is sometimes called "the queen of the social sciences," precisely because its highly quantitative methods give it a (false) sense of precision. I say "the sense of precision" because it's rarely as precise as the economists claim it is. Some branches of economics that are more difficult to quantify, like institutional economics or political economy, have their own prestigious journals. But it's hard to be a political economist and publish in the *American Journal of Economics*.

For the purposes of this of this discussion, I need a term for a person who's comfortable using qualitative data, people like us Oxfammers. I might use the term *anthropologist*, but that's a little bit narrow. So, I'm just going to call people who use qualitative data *social dudes* (that's a very technical term), and I will refer to the quant jocks as *numbers dudes*.

If we think about quantitative data, that's associated with the term *hard data*. No matter how weak or how strong the method behind the data collection or its analysis, it's still presumed to be objective. It's presumed to point us toward the truth. Qualitative data are presumed to be *soft data*. No matter how strong or weak its method of collection is, it's presumed to be subjective. It's not unambiguous; it forces us to make our own conclusions. It's debatable and does not necessarily indicate where the truth lies. So, this kind of prevailing general attitude puts qualitative data at a disadvantage from the beginning. It means that there's this constant struggle for legitimacy for those who believe in the value of qualitative data. This is a battle the numbers dudes don't have to wage *a priori*. Numbers dudes are sometimes criticized for being irrelevant, but their legitimacy is not questioned except by other academic numbers dudes, who argue about the methods involved. But their legitimacy in the enterprise is generally not contested.

This preferential attitude toward numbers provides some challenges for us in the development sector. Decisions about development programs or projects are often made on the basis of objective quantitative criteria, or at least presumably so. There's the economic analysis: Darius [Teter] is well familiar with the benefit-cost analysis and with internal rate of return. Whether or not those tools are really objective is debatable. If you just change the assumed discount rate in either of those methods, suddenly an unviable project becomes viable. It doesn't take much to turn a dog into a best in show. There's also technical feasibility; sometimes you find development projects being approved from technical feasibility alone—will it work? Apart from the economics, just answer the question, "Will it work?" If that gets a "yes," sometimes the project gets approved even if it's not necessarily very economically attractive. Sometimes projects get approved based on quantifiable self-interest. What I mean is: How much money will flow to the agency as a result of this project, whether it's technically or economically viable, or not. Is it going to bring in the money? You sometimes find that as a *sub rosa* criterion. There are non-quantitative issues that are considered in projects by the decision makers. Larger political calculus can be important, but those considerations are not generally publicly debated. They're not transparent and they're not allowed to be debated openly. You get people in places like ministries of finance that are very uncomfortable with qualitative data. Why? Well, qualitative data deal with people, their motives, and their behaviors. People are difficult to deal with; they can be hard to understand, their goals can be vague or poorly articulated, they can change their minds, and they are not always rational in purely economic terms. Putting numbers to these dimensions is painstaking and also imprecise.

Qualitative data often do not suggest a clear course of action; they do not set the standards by which project managers can make go or no-go decisions, or help them define clear cutoff points for service delivery, or allow them to define the impacts of the programs easily. Project managers have often never been well-trained in the appropriate uses of qualitative data. If we look at the education system in many countries, a lot of times people are tracked even from high school. I remember in Indonesia: In grade ten, students were put into one of three slots. You were either in the math and sciences slot, in the social sciences slot, or in the arts and humanities slot. You didn't take many classes, even in high school, in the other areas. So, you were very narrowly tracked and your way of thinking was conditioned with a particular set of skills and analysis techniques. It didn't prepare you well for dealing with anybody in the other tracts. I think we have to remember that the education system in some countries is not nearly as ecumenical, I'd say, as our system. It doesn't nearly approach the type of cross-boundary thinking that we've come to associate with a broad education in the United States. Even at the undergraduate level, we're pretty comfortable with people taking classes in a lot of different disciplines. In fact, there are distribution requirements in most colleges, where you have to take some classes in other fields than your major. You have to take some humanities, you have to take

some sciences or math, and you have to take some social sciences, no matter what your discipline is. But that's not the case in many countries.

We have some examples, if we think about the type of people we often deal with in our work. Take irrigation engineers. In the countries I've been familiar with in Asia, they often go into that field not because they want to work with farmers; they want to work with water and concrete. Engineers typically dislike ambiguity; they typically like things to be very clear. So, they might have a notion of what an *equal* division of water is, but they might not have a very good notion of what a *fair* distribution of water is—that requires a whole different set of skills. And they're usually not trained to think about the interactions between the environment and the social organization of irrigation, about the relationship between water rights and physical structures for example. Or, think about agronomists. What do agronomists do? They're scientists, first of all. They're physical scientists; they often want to work with soil and plants, not with farmers. They might not be aware that farmers sometimes need a seed to optimize production across more than just the yield of grain. In fact, one of the problems in some of the early Green Revolution work was that all the focus was on getting bigger heads of grain. The farmers didn't necessarily always want more grain; they needed stalk as fodder for their animals, too. They might be also producing for ground cover, green manure, or some other soil regenerative characteristic, and not just for grain.

Take foresters. They go into their profession to work with land and trees, so they're taught to think rather one-dimensionally in terms of growth rates, cubic meters of production, and wood grades. The attention of the foresters on the ecosystem with people living in and nearby the forest is not stressed. Foresters might not be aware that the people living near the forest may see the value of the forest in terms of branches for firewood, leaf litter for watershed protection, habitat, or even psychic beauty. The relatively new field of social forestry has tried to address this gap to some degree. Even doctors go into medicine sometimes because they're more concerned with the pathology and the epidemiology of disease than with the people. They may think of sick people as patients or sufferers, rather than as people who have free will, agency, resources, and willpower. What we in the USA have tried to do is to create master of public health (MPH) programs, which try to bridge some of those issues. MPH programs are big programs in the United States, but not always in the countries where we work.

Numbers dudes may feel more comfortable with false precision in quantitative form than with qualitative data, which admits its imprecision up front. Qualitative data often say, "Well we don't really know, but this is what we think," and the numbers dudes say, "Well I'm just going to take this number rather than the fuzzy data that you're presenting." If we think about entertaining the qualitative data as valid knowledge, it invites us to think about difference. Social dudes can be a real pain for the numbers dudes. People may be different culturally in terms of their

motivations, their life cycles, and their gender outlooks and roles. This is highly inconvenient; it would be much easier for us all if we could assume that we are all essentially the same. Admittedly some of us are richer, more educated, or more urbane than others, but essentially if everyone was following the same logic, the same rationale, and the same goals—that would be a lot easier. Admitting that we're different skews us more in the direction of using qualitative data to describe those differences and to examine the underlying mechanisms by which those differences shift or remain the same. This is what social dudes need to do well.

CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENCE THINKING

We should also be aware that numbers dudes and social dudes often use different methods of solving problems. Are you a convergent or divergent thinker? Let me explain. A convergent thinker is often somebody who deals a lot with quantitative problems. The numbers dudes start by trying to describe the problem in some kind of mathematical form. It may be complicated; it may be a big long equation; it may be a linear program or some kind of multifactorial analysis. But they've got a big long equation and, in simplified terms, what the quantitative person is taught to do is to solve pieces of this problem independently as much as he or she can. Then you get partial solutions—you solve under the radical, you solve inside the parentheses, and then you're defining more narrowly the problem until finally you get to a unique, unambiguous, quantitative answer. The risks of that convergent thinking are that sometimes you circumscribe the problem too narrowly, and you leave out all the important stuff that's not easily quantifiable. You try to put into your model everything you could possibly think is relevant and quantifiable and you leave all the other stuff out, calling it an externality. You could often be missing important processes, intentions, motives, and goals, and unintended consequences. These are often not included in your solution. It can sometimes lead you to make decisions based on the short-term and small-picture analysis, when sometimes we really have a complicated social problem that requires more tools and humility to solve.

Divergent thinking is often used by the social dudes. That's a different process. They start by saying, "Okay, here are the boundaries of our problem. My gosh, this is connected to that, and that's connected to that, and that's connected to that." Pretty soon you get a problem that looks a lot bigger. Oxfam loves to do this; we excel at this. Now the problem is, if we stop here, we're doing bad social science because we're paralyzed. We've said in a sense that everything is connected to everything else. Given that, what do we do? We don't have a good answer for that. Our power analysis—our Program Strategy Papers—should be the type of exercise that will get us from a broad definition of what the problem is

to a narrower definition. We should be able to take that big analysis, where we've got all the major things considered, and make some decisions about what the most important things in that soup of variables are. At the end of the day, our problem specification might be bigger than it started off as, but it's not everything. We need to do that; if we just stop with identifying the huge problem, we haven't done our job very well.

Then there's the communication of our work. Social dudes are actually not very good at communicating some of their findings. We oftentimes are too descriptive in our analysis and conclusions, rather than talking about the underlying mechanisms that are at work. We're not often explicit enough about our theories of change, and when we are not explicit about our theories of change, we don't leave decision makers with clear ways forward. If we just leave our decision makers with the analysis, "It depends," that doesn't really help us move forward. I think we sometimes don't engage enough in next-generation analysis. What would be the second- and third- generation effects of a particular action? This is really evident in some of the work that we do in our power analysis, where we talk about how we're going to get elites to change, and how we're going to empower people living in poverty and marginalized situations. Then we assume the elites are static; we assume that we're going to press against the elites in some way and that they're just going to roll over. We assume that they're not going to try to defend their power or counterpunch with some type of force. We do a disservice when we stop with the first-generation impact and don't try to anticipate next-generation things. This is very hard; it gets very speculative. The further we go into the future, the more speculative it is and the less ground we have to stand on when we're talking with the numbers dudes. But we have to figure out a way to do that better. That's where we have to be better social scientists, and not just social activists or investigative journalists. There's a role for that—for the investigative journalist and the social activist—but we also have to pay more attention to good social science research, develop linkages with organizations with scientists who are good at this type of methodology, and really try to bring that in a formal and forceful way into our work.

That doesn't mean that we need to turn all that social data into some kind of quantitative form to get it heeded. We've got a lot of important intangibles that we have not, as a scientific community worldwide, been good at quantifying. Maybe we should try. We've got things like dignity, respect, honor, identity, independence or interdependence, psychic gratification, freedom, cultural self-expression, power, control, pride, prestige, sense of belonging, motives, goals, and values. People are complicated, and we need to factor some of these dimensions in. We need to be talking about changes in attitudes and beliefs, and not just changes in skills, opportunities, and assets when we think about program goals. If we don't, the literature is replete with examples of failed projects that had not considered cultural differences, or different motivations. I remember from a long time ago, there was a guy named Cochrane who wrote the book *Cultural*

Appraisal of Projects (he's an anthropologist). He was looking at one Pacific Islands group that rejected the use of DDT, even though it was clearly reducing the mosquito population. What he found was that the little house lizards ate the mosquitoes and absorbed the DDT, and the lizards would then be eaten by the cats, who would then have trouble because of the DDT. The cats may have been serving an economic purpose in terms of keeping mice down, but the people really lamented the loss of cats because they liked the cats. These were their pets. So they rejected the DDT. The mosquitoes were less important than maintaining the health of their cats.

So, people can have different goals and a different hierarchy of needs. We sometimes think that, again, we're all the same. But we've got some different values. Economists have got a particular problem when they try to define the value of these things because they talk about a utility function. They say, "Well everybody's utility function is different; you've got your own personal utility function. Darius may have a utility function that places bike riding higher on his list, when it may be lower on mine." If everybody's different, then that's a problem for economics. If everybody's the same, then we're probably over-generalizing. I think there are some methodological problems we have in figuring out how to describe things like our preferences, motives, and values. Frankly, I'm actually a reformed...well, I'm a reformed everything. I started off as a psychologist; my undergraduate degree was in psychology, a lot of quantitative training in. Then, my master's is in development economics, which was highly quantitative. I thought that economics was the best thing since sliced bread and canned beer. It was great, but my Ph.D. is in development sociology, where I learned how to critique the economists. So, I've been accused of being a lot of things. Most of the accusations are accurate!

LESSONS FOR OXFAM

We need to figure out a way to analyze critically both quantitative and qualitative methods and data in a way that doesn't automatically give priority to one over the other. They're both important, they're both necessary, and they both can be misused. When we think about some of our challenges as Oxfam, qualitative data can be difficult to collect in a good way. Collecting sloppy data is pretty easy, and I think some of our PSPs are examples of sloppy analysis and very imprecise use of data.

We don't have to become top-rated social scientists; that's not our job here. There are people out there who do that, and we have to figure out how to link with them. But we have to know enough about what we need to be able to determine who to link with. The methods that are used for some of that qualitative data collection can be complicated. We need to figure out a way to simplify the message that comes out of that, but not simplify the methods. The

methods, if they're complicated, have become complicated for a good reason. But we can simplify the message so it's understandable to different groups of people. People like project managers, ministry of finance people, ministry of water resources or forestry, etc. We have to avoid social science jargon. Social science jargon is often an attempt to obfuscate in order to sound erudite. In my experience, the numbers dudes hate that. The social dudes sometimes hate it, but the numbers dudes really hate it, and they say, "Oh, man. This is so much pretentious mumbo-jumbo," when they hear lots of words that end in "-ation." Of course, I think you all know that we have to be careful not to use some of our Oxfam speak when talking to the general public. Things like *duty bearer*, *agent of change*, and *gender-reflective programming* don't mean a lot to the general public. They're fine for us as shorthand, but we need to think about how to use them in public spaces.

Finally, we should use hard data, quantitative data, whenever we can. When it makes sense to use it, we shouldn't shy away from it. We should avoid false precision, though. How many times have you read a report that says something like, "67.234 percent of the people disagreed with project"? You should just say two-thirds. We need to admit ignorance when we don't know something. I think that whether you're a numbers dude or you're a social dude, you need to be aware of the perspectives of others. Think, "How is this person framing the problem? How is this person I'm talking to going to try to solve this problem? Are they going to solve it through convergent or divergent thinking? Are they going to rely a lot on numbers, or are they comfortable with other kinds of methods?" We need to be able to think consciously about some of that, especially when working with people from governments and industries, to be able to frame things in terms that they not only understand but also can become familiar with.

So, I think we have to hone our ability to be powerful through simplification, not over-complexification. By the way, don't use words like *over-complexification*!

Q & A PERIOD

Q from Darius Teter, VP Programs: "I used to work as an economist at the Asian Development Bank and my job was to prepare \$50 million projects. And I did. They sent me to training, and the trainer was a cynical, retired guy from the World Bank. The first thing he said was, 'Does anybody here know what an internal rate of return is, what it means?' So all of us eager beavers raised our hands to give the technical definition, and he said, 'You're all wrong. In this bank, it's an integer between 12 and 22! Always. Unless you don't ever want to get promoted.' And as I started working on these analyses I realized that by changing one or two assumptions that were buried in those spreadsheets, I could in fact create an internal rate of return that was between 12 and 22 percent every time. Nobody could unpack it to see what I manipulated. Later on in my career,

when I was advising the vice president, projects would come to us and we would say, 'This rate of return looks really funny,' and they would say, 'What rate of return do you want?' So, very large amounts of money are distributed and allocated according to that kind of total bull. The question is: Do you think that qualitative methods are more susceptible to strategic gaming behavior from the people that you're interviewing, compared to quantitative methods, because of the types of questions that are more often asked in a qualitative interview than in quantitative research?"

John: "When you say 'gaming'—"

Darius: "If I think that the answer to my question will help determine whether or not you come in with more project money, I'm going to answer a certain way. I'm going to try to figure out what this foreign guy wants me to say."

John: "I think that it's clear that people will do that. In an earlier time, I gave an example of what type of quantitative—and this is quantitative—data you would get out of different agencies depending on what they're interested in. For example, in Indonesia I found that if you wanted data on irrigated area, you would not go to the Irrigation Department because the Irrigation Department was getting their operation and maintenance budget based on the figure they gave for irrigated area. They had a big incentive to inflate that number, so they'd get more operation and maintenance budget. You went to the Ministry of Agriculture to get data on irrigated area; they had no interest in inflating it."

Darius: "Or they wanted more irrigation projects so they would bring in a big dam."

John: "The Agriculture people reported it pretty accurately, because we did physical measurements of some of these systems and compared them. When it came to yield data, you could not get an accurate set of information from the Agriculture people. Why? Because they get their benefits according to presumed increases in yield. So they would give you vastly inflated numbers on the yield of rice; you got the good numbers from the Irrigation Department, interestingly enough! In terms of gaming, when the farmer goes to the Agriculture Department's extension service to ask for fertilizer, suddenly he's got a lot of land, because he wants a lot of fertilizer. There's a quota. But when the guy from the Agrarian Department comes by (he's the guy that deals with the land tax), suddenly that same farmer's got very little land, because he doesn't want to pay a lot of taxes. So, I don't know if we can say that one type of data is gamed more than another. Those were all quantitative types of measures that were clearly manipulated because people had an interest in getting more money or resources for their department."

Darius: "Where I was going with that question is: If you look at a lot of our impact evaluations that we have planned for our long-term programs, a key research methodology is what they call *key informant interviews*, and you could really screw that up. I wonder, spending \$25,000 on key informant interviews to find out

what we've achieved in the FLAIR program or the Gender Violence Program, I just wonder what we're really getting."

John: "I do have some worries about that, too. Key informants are usually local elites of some kind. They're usually better-educated, they usually have more land, and they tend to have more resources, more prestige, and more power. It's an empirical question whether they can speak for the whole community. Sometimes they can and do, and are willing to do so. Sometimes they give you a very skewed perception of life in the village and what your project has done. They themselves may gain a lot of prestige from having brought in a project, even if it's not working that well. So, there are some dangers there. One of the cardinal rules of social research is that even if you don't do random sampling, try to get a sense of how this project or activity affects different people in the project area. That's the reason why, when the Participatory Rural Appraisal was being developed, they would do things like transects; they would just walk in a straight line and observe differences along that line. Or they would try to have group meetings to talk in a group about land ownership. For example, land ownership is a really sensitive topic and people don't like to tell you how much land they own. But sometimes people are unwilling to lie about it in front of their neighbors, because their neighbors all know how much land they've got, too. So, sometimes a group format allows people to actually give you more accurate data.

"I'm a little worried, Darius, yeah, if we're relying overly on key informants. Unless those key informants have been chosen to somehow represent the difference that occurs in the project area, then we could be in trouble."

Q: "Some strategies for getting around that ... let's start with the key informants. Of course, all the leaders come and they want to talk, but it almost becomes a decoy group. You send a team there to talk to all the leaders, but actually you want to talk to the poor women. So, you just get them all talking about something—you don't really care what they have to say. You start there, and that's your decoy. Then you pull the women off to the side and you start talking to them and start getting a different perspective. But you're touching on a more general question. I really see with, as you call it, the numbers dudes and the social dudes, a real iterative process going on. To me, the numbers dudes have little idea of all these variables you're pointing out, and they come up with their specific question, but they're usually so ignorant about a lot of things that they spend an enormous amount of time asking a whole bunch of irrelevant questions that don't really get to the heart of the matter. So, it really should be an iterative process. I like to describe my initial research impressions as rising up like swamp gas. You get some initial impression and you sort of test out those impressions through qualitative research, and by looking at groups and talking to people, so you at least know what the range of issues and relevance are. You test those out. Then you move onto the third step and you say, 'Okay, within that, now we have more or less of an idea of what's relevant here. Let's figure out the quantitative variables to get at that.'

“Then there’s the whole issue that we really haven’t addressed at all is how to have anybody actually take seriously or use in any way the research findings that have actually arrived. So, that’s another issue, and then it’s a tradeoff between having staff collect information or others. So, it depends on what your strategy is: to detect the truth or to engage with people in a process of reflection in which they’ll actually take action which will end up resolving issues. And what’s the tradeoff on that? Just a few random thoughts.”

John: “Those are highly relevant; they’re not random at all.”

Q: “John, maybe you could talk for a minute on this. We have a really great real-world experiment going on right now, which is in the Saving for Change program. Working with the Innovations for Poverty Action at Yale University, we’re finalizing a report of a randomized controlled trial of villages that had Saving for Change and villages that didn’t, and asking a series of questions. Can you see any difference between them along these axes that we care about? Impacts, social power—”

John: “And we’ve put a lot of money into the social analysis of that program through the BARA group in Arizona.”

Q: “The parallel study is by the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology at the University of Arizona, which is asking a similar set of questions but from a very social scientist, anthropological point of view. These reports are supposed to be combined into one. Of course, the IPA folks from Yale view theirs as the one true thing, and ‘you’re welcome to append your little stories to support our findings.’ So, zero interest from the quant jocks about the anthropological research. Where does that stand right now, this combining of these two mixed methods?”

John: “It was actually specified in the terms of the contract that it had to be a joint report.”

Audience member: “This has caused enormous angst, particularly on the quantitative end. I think that this has really been a forced marriage between quantitative and qualitative, which is going to shed more light on what is actually going on than either one. This is really groundbreaking; this has virtually never happened with this level of investment, having a both quantitative and qualitative report. Actually, some of the qualitative work was done in exactly the same villages as that of the IPA. So you’re looking at not only the same data sets, but the same villages, but through a different lens. But then, the thinking about what questions are really relevant to either of them is based on our observations from the years before that—the swamp gas idea. What do we think is happening? What do we observe? What’s the range of things which came up in informant interviews? That, in turn, informs both the quantitative and the qualitative, which is bumping it up to a whole other level.”

Audience member: “So let me ask you a very specific question on that. One of the theories that we wanted to test was that creating women’s savings groups in these villages in Mali would actually lead to some measurable form of empowerment. Whether they had more authority and ability in decision making in the household or (I forget some of the other ways we were trying to test that), but the randomized controlled trial found no statistically significant difference between project and control villages in terms of whatever the elements or attributes of empowerment were. And that was a big disappointment for us, because our hypothesis based on three or four years of observation was that that was really significant. Because when you interview women in the program and you ask them what they valued about it, they were as likely to say, ‘I value my increased status in the household’ as they were to say, ‘I value the ability to borrow \$30.’”

Audience member: “That’s interesting, and we’re getting findings. But the basic idea is that for the qualitative person, the perceptions of change can be measured by specific action: ‘Did you go and talk to the chief more frequently than you did before?’ So, I think we’re going to get two different takes on that. One is the lack of statistical significance on the quantitative side but a lot more on the qualitative side. Another thing that we’re really thinking about is the theory of change. What changes will happen? If we have a change between Time A and Time B in three years with an average person in the program. But it could be that the change is going to happen in years four, five, six, or seven. That calls for going in and looking at this later on as well, so... Also, the impact of political crises, massive drought, and skyrocketing food prices may have an effect.”

John: “This is a good example of trying to look at some processes that we possibly don’t understand very well and trying to figure out what the right methods are to try to get at them. What methods do we use to look at power, for example? So you have several possibilities. One is that there is actually no difference between our groups and the control groups. That’s assuming that we’re measuring it correctly now; but we might not be measuring it correctly. Or we might be measuring it correctly, as you said, but there’s a lag time that’s longer than we’ve built into our analysis. These are the types of things that we have to work through progressively.”

Q: “In that analysis that you’re doing, do you know if they did any next-generation analysis? Maybe there’s no change in the problems of women, but their daughters will see that their mothers are involved in this and might have different approaches.”

John: “One example from Saving for Change in a village in Mali, Koulukati. I don’t know if you remember, Jeff and Darius, but I was really impressed by the atmosphere that we found ourselves in in this one village. We come in as outsiders with a certain amount of prestige, and we came around the side of this building and there was this village chief. He was squatting down next to the door with his shirt off, and he didn’t say a word. He just squatted there looking at us

dumbly. Some of our team went over to start talking to him and he still didn't do anything; he just stayed there squatting on the stoop. You could see the women looking at this chief, and you could see the wheels turning as they thought, 'Hey, this guy's not honoring our guests. What's going on?' So one of the women goes into the building, grabs a shirt, and unceremoniously just drops it on the guy. The guy is shocked, but he puts on this shirt and he stands up and starts talking to us. The woman, after dropping the shirt, went back to the company of her fellow women and you could see them chattering to each other as she obviously took refuge with her group. I just can't imagine something like that happening without Saving for Change."

Audience member: "But how did you measure empowerment?"

John: "I think that probably the proper measure of empowerment in this case is the height from which the shirt is dropped. Anyway, this is tough. I think we need to think a lot more about it and some of our research designs and some of our evaluation work. Einstein said it pretty well—and he's a numbers dude—when he said, 'Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.' Thanks, everybody."

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- Is qualitative data inherently less valid than quantitative data? Why or why not?
- What techniques might you use to present qualitative data in a convincing way to the quantitatively oriented professional?
- What techniques would you use to strengthen the collection and analysis of quantitative data for partners of Oxfam?



Nak Thuk transplants lettuce at the garden owned by her mother in law Svay Mon in Prey Cheuteal village, Cambodia. *Patrick Brown Panos / Oxfam America*

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From projects to programs and beyond: getting scale through linking long-term development and policy advocacy at the national level

PREFACE

Our new strategic plan envisions the different members of Oxfam working in greater concert, both in specific countries as well as globally. Handling the large set of logistical issues involved in becoming One Oxfam in itself is a huge undertaking. But we have more fundamental challenges to deal with. There is a range of philosophies across the confederation about the best and most appropriate ways for Oxfam to relate, for example, to local civil society or to national governments, to name just two of the currently hotly debated topics. You may wish to refer to the seminars we had on relations with civil society and working with government for more detail about the specific contours of that discussion.

As a confederation, Oxfam is one of the world's largest relief and development agencies, so we should take on the big issues. We have a duty to follow and stimulate the continued growth of our efforts, and to have a hand in promoting systemic change. Unfortunately, in my observation, we too often scatter our efforts and spread our resources too thinly. We have hundreds of projects around the world—often uncoordinated even when productive links could be made. It can be a nightmare just keeping track of all this dispersed activity, much less measuring its impact. If we split our resources across too many small initiatives, we squander the chance to play ball with the heavy hitters, and thereby we lose the chance to affect the causes of poverty and social injustice.

Accordingly, our new strategic plan expects us to be doing significantly more national level advocacy. Indeed, most of the laws that affect people living with the injustice of poverty are promulgated, implemented, and enforced at the national and local level. So, it behooves us to develop advocacy strategies that will carry a strong voice in the effort to make local laws and policies more pro-poor.

Advocacy will not be our sole point of entry. We will still do a lot of field-level long-term development. But the impact of our efforts to change policies, procedures, beliefs, attitudes, laws, and sometimes even culture will be multiplied many times over if we can link that long-term development work in the field to some targeted advocacy in the political, legal, and operating environments.

I know, this may seem rather interventionist on our part. But, I argue, it is entirely appropriate. We—and here I use the term “we” to include all of us, foreign and domestic, donors and receivers, powerful and weak —simply don't have enough time to go village by village, family by family, or person by person in our efforts to combat poverty. Nor do we have enough resources to work that way. Actually, it is a good thing that we don't. We should leave micro-field interventions to smaller NGOs or to self-propagating forces like market mechanisms. We need to be the ones who consciously align with the most threatened and marginalized groups.

We want to promote systemic change. Policy is a blunt instrument in that it rarely affects all people we want to help in a positive way, and it will inevitably

negatively affect some of the people we are trying to help. (There are always some losers even when the policy shift is good for most of the people we hope to help.) Be that as it may, policy remains one of the most powerful tools for effecting change for a large number of people. Projects alone do not and cannot solve poverty. We implicitly recognize this in Oxfam when we consciously develop advocacy programs that are systemic, long-term, and global. Our campaigning capability enables us to work on fundamental rights issues in the law and in policies. And, we are slowly coming to the realization that should have been obvious to us long ago: that while changing policies may be a *sine qua non* of development, we also need to pay attention to the implementation of policies to make sure that their intended effect is actually felt by the people we care about.

A good example of integrating field work and policy change from national level to regional level to global level is our extractive industries initiative. For example, we have worked at a national level with the Mining Roundtable in Peru, at the regional level advising the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on mining law for West Africa, and at the international level with our Publish What You Pay campaign. As momentum for working in extractive industries has grown, more countries have gotten involved, and the program has grown organically.

But getting good policy change is not easy. And, by the way, it is a good thing that it is not easy. If changing policies were too simple, we would have to constantly worry about policies we had just helped to improve. We might suddenly see them changing again into something undesirable. Policy change should be informed by careful research on the effects of existing policies, on strategic information and practical experience, and on how to follow the steps for reaching social consensus. Reaching consensus on any new policy is critically important for the shape of the policy itself, for the financial appropriations necessary to implement it, and for the effort it takes to actually oversee compliance.

Today, I want to share with you some experiences with linking long-term development and policy change work at scale. These examples come from my work with the Ford Foundation in Asia. But I believe these lessons are also highly relevant for the work of Oxfam. Our Oxfam program officers and program coordinators essentially work as grant makers, because we work primarily through local partners. The main difference with Ford Foundation and Oxfam is that we have less money to work with per program officer, and every year we need to raise the money we grant out. There is no endowment. But that keeps us on our toes, right? Well, it should keep us sharp, but unfortunately we do often make our grants in the same old way, and to the same old partners, even when conditions and opportunities have evolved. And, it is true that we do not support as much policy work in the field as we might.

In fact, aside from our work in extractive industries, our policy work is not as robust as it could be. For too long, we have been engaged in some variation of direct service delivery under the aegis of our country-level programs. This may or may not be wise, but in any case we have not paid enough attention to the possibilities of policy change at the national level. Yes, there are some notable exceptions: the Family Law in Mozambique and the Inheritance Law in Zimbabwe are good examples. But these are all too rare. We should take better advantage of our good relations with partners in-country, and our boots on the ground capability to work more on systemic change at the national level.

THE GOAL: SCALING UP

Our main goal is to help facilitate as many people as possible to achieve just and lasting solutions to poverty. Our conception of poverty is slowly shifting from defining poverty as a “lack of goods and services” or a “lack of wealth” to the concept of the “lack of justice.” We have all heard the proverb, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Well, in the places we work, people already know how to fish, but cannot gain access to the fishing grounds for a variety of reasons. We need to think about securing the right to fish in clean water that is not being exploited by more powerful actors. From this perspective comes a new leverage model. In general, I believe, we should give higher priority to helping many people each a little compared to helping just a few people a lot. As one of the largest development NGOs in the world, we have a special duty to think big. This serves the equity principle. Though NGOs have achieved some major successes and are still very important, trying to reach scale is critical.

There is a particular art to achieving results at scale through changing policies. With more than 1 billion people still living in poverty worldwide, we need to use our size, our credibility, our reach, and our voice to achieve larger impact. This means taking more of our efforts to scale, and advocacy is usually an integral part of the scaling up phase. To get scale we also need to focus our efforts, and make them more strategic. And, we must make each of our efforts part of a larger leveraging strategy.

I think there are six main strategies we can consider when thinking about how to go to scale:

1. First, there is the viral grassroots strategy. Our Saving for Change program relies substantially on villager-to-villager outreach and self-replication. It actually operates below the policy radar. This is one program that actually seeks to stay clear of policymakers. It operates at a level that should be too small to be of much interest to government or private sector actors. But it achieves scale through the very large number of people it has enrolled in a

very short time—over 600,000 in seven years. The genius of this program is that it does not require much active stimulation from Oxfam; it promotes indigenous saving and judicious lending of those savings within a group format. Our program staff have carefully considered the issue of sustainability, and they seem to have found a solution. The program will continue even after Oxfam is no longer involved.

2. A second way to achieve scale is to work through an outsider advocacy strategy. However, I am skeptical about the outsider advocacy strategy by itself. I believe that the much vaunted Make Trade Fair campaign is one example. It did a lot to make visible the inequities in foreign trade agreements and in foreign assistance. It was great at exposing the risks for poor countries of treaties like NAFTA and other regional trade agreements. But did our campaign actually lead to concrete change? I am not aware that it did. It might have if we had stuck with the theme longer, but after the initial surge in activity, it quickly faded from public view and died a quiet death when our funding ran out.
3. A third way to get scale is to work on policy from an insiders' angle. This is essentially the way our work on law in southern Africa was constructed. We worked with activist NGOs, national policymakers, legal experts, and a few outside experts who could provide comparative examples of laws that changed in favor of the poor. There was no active global program on the subject, but change at the national level became possible through determined effort and long-term funding. The Mozambique program learned valuable lessons from the work in Zimbabwe that had gone on before. In the case of the Mozambique Family Law, we kept at the issue for 10 years and eventually achieved results.
4. A fourth way to get scale is to work through government structures. The System of Rice Intensification in Vietnam is an example. We work hand in hand with the government's Department of Plant Protection to spread the innovation. The program is as much about changing government departments as it is about changing farmer practices directly. Getting the government to change the way it spends its routine budget can be an especially powerful and sustainable way to effect change. By doing so, it creates durable institutions and unparalleled long-term support.
5. A fifth way to get scale is to work at getting corporations to change their business practices. Oxfam America has a few examples it can point to in this regard, such as the agreement with Yum Brands to pay more to tomato pickers in Florida, or to get retailers to follow their supply chains back and demand more ethical practices all along the line.
6. Finally, there is harnessing the market as a way to get scale. Our work on agricultural weather insurance in Africa is an example of stimulating a market

that did not exist before through creating new and specialized insurance products for poor farmers. It is still a bit early to tell whether this is a viable commercial market, or whether it is too dependent on subsidies to be self-perpetuating. Another good example is the work that Oxfam GB has done with vegetable growers in Colombia and what Oxfam Hong Kong has done with commercializing bamboo products. To the extent that we can get regular markets to move in more pro-poor ways, that is a huge step toward more sustainability.

PROGRAMS, NOT PROJECTS; SAILBOATS, NOT RAILROADS

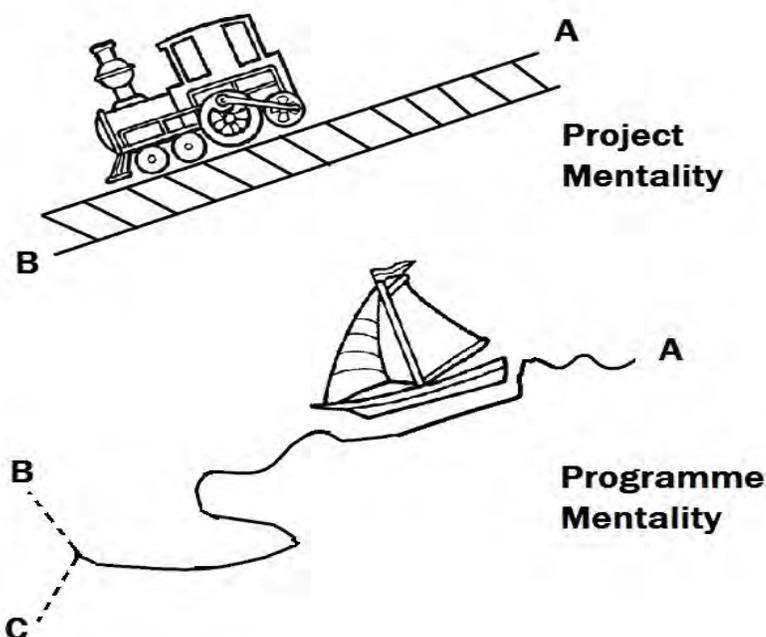
In practice, what does it take to build an effective program? What do we have to do to get out of the small-thinking project trap? First of all, we have to conceptualize a program as a set of interlinking activities—some of them policy-oriented, some of them practical field applications—that are pursued over a substantial period of time. The Oxfam International definition reads: “We can broadly define a ‘Programme’ as a set of strategically aligned, mutually reinforcing interventions—by Oxfam and others—that contributes to sustained, positive impact on poor people’s lives.” (OI definition, 2007). This definition envisions our efforts being linked with those of others; having long-term horizons; utilizing diverse partnerships; and intervening at multiple levels.

Projects tend to be like railroads. Because they are short term, they need to specify their goals sharply and to deliver on their goals quickly. There is little room or time to adjust the basic design of the activities or to pursue alternative strategies. Implementing projects is like getting on a train. The tracks are already laid. You know where you want to go, and the project has already defined how you are supposed to get there. So you get on the train and ride to the destination, and you try not to be too disappointed if you find out the train took you to the wrong station!

Working in a program mode requires more creativity and nuance, and one has to be open to the possibility of changes—sometimes major ones—along the course of the program. The logic, the tactics, and even the strategy need to be revisited from time to time. We learn as we go along and we try to build in enough flexibility that some changes can be made during the program.

Working in a long-term program mode is much more like sailing a boat. We know roughly where we want to go, but on the way we encounter uncharted obstacles. Our maps are not very good and our equipment is rudimentary. We have to change directions sometimes as larger events sometimes alter the environment as we learn more about the behavior of elites or as new resources become

available. Each of the course corrections that we make is informed by analysis. More will be said about the information system that provides that analysis later.



Short-term project vs. long-term program mode. The long-term program needs the flexibility to change course as the program unfolds. *John Ambler*

When we get stuck in the project mentality, it is hard to counter the criticism that we are just development day-trippers. It is not exaggerating to say that a good deal of this fondness for projects can be traced to donors who think in terms of narrowly time-bounded activities. To the extent that we have to follow their guidelines and mandates, we end up getting caught in the short-term project cycle, and we find ourselves rushing from project to project, barely touching the roots of poverty.

This project dilettantism not only is too one-dimensional—after all, people don't live in "sectors"!—but it also fosters a sort of campaign attention deficit syndrome. Sometimes, we have a tendency to abandon an issue as soon as we make any progress in changing a policy or law. We usually do not follow through long enough to make sure that the new policy takes root, that it becomes part of a new and evolving social fabric that is more just. Our campaigners, especially those in Europe or America, are very good at enlisting the support and sign on from developing countries, and the developing countries are great at mobilizing country-level interest and resource commitment around the campaign topic. But before Oxfam's very capable country-based staff have had time to develop strong field-based components of the global campaign, the global campaigners have moved on to another topic. Ideally, we should stick to a campaign theme for a long enough period of time so that the field components of the campaign and the global advocacy efforts can be put into synergistic action. Continual

interaction between centrally located staff and field staff would help translate field perspectives into a much broader and more integrated message that larger numbers of people could subscribe to. When the global message is progressively refined with input from actual field realities, then even a narrow project can enrich larger national interests, and national interests can be factored in to the design of the various program components on a global level.

THE PROGRAM STRATEGY PAPER

The first element of a program is a document that sets out the long-term goal and does some analysis on how we might get there. A program needs to be guided by a vision of what it intends to accomplish. That is the role of the Program Strategy Paper. We have had some difficulty getting across the idea that this is not a major academic paper, nor is it a tactical paper that lays out in detail exactly which steps will be taken by whom and in what order and over what time period.

When done well it is actually a rather simple document. It lays out the problem. It identifies the final end point that is desired along with major intermediate goals that are informed by our theory of change. It discusses the potential points of entry for Oxfam, and it identifies major blockers and partners, as best we can imagine at this point in time. It is a document that contains the power analysis for the problem—who is important, what incentives they have to change, what they will likely do to maintain their power, and what Oxfam and its partners can do to shift the scales in favor of people living in poverty.

This power analysis is not necessarily prescriptive; it gives a sense of direction, but it is not a roadmap. Nor is it definitive; it will need periodic revision as power shifts. We must also keep in mind that often power analysis is not intuitive; staff will need training to understand and appreciate its potential.

RIGHTS-BASED PROGRAMMING

Because we are focused on changing power relations in ways that favor people living in poverty, our analysis in the program strategy paper needs to look carefully at the dynamics between different stakeholders. These dynamics are not always visible at first glance, and a program paper acknowledges from the beginning that adjustments will need to be made. Using a rights-based approach, our programs must combine demand-side efforts that help people hold duty bearers accountable and supply-side efforts to help those duty bearers build their capacity to respond.

NEW PROGRAMMATIC ROLES FOR OXFAM

Times are changing. It is now rare to find a situation where Oxfam has to be the direct service provider. National and local organizations in poor countries are stronger than they once were. They can be true partners in ways that were difficult to achieve before. All the investment in national staff and in indigenous education systems over the years is paying off. We need to build on that stronger institutional and human resources framework by changing our mode of intervention.

Today, a good program requires that Oxfam play some new roles. The idea is to move Oxfam out of direct action mode, and into more catalytic roles like convener and grant maker, idea broker and agenda setter.

FROM PROGRAMS TO POLICY: GAINING LEGITIMACY

Achieving scale can be transparently out in the open or operating under the radar screen, but it is always challenging. Indeed, some governments like to keep innovative programs in isolated boxes. They use the newness of the program as a way to actually compartmentalize it, either because they want to see if the program really works, or because they fear the reaction of higher ups in the government. Governments even sometimes actively hinder the scaling up of programs, for a variety of reasons. We will examine one such situation, in Indonesia, later in our discussion.

Policymaking is not for everyone. And it requires having enough legitimacy to even enter the policymaking arena in the first place. Although we may have systemic policy change in our sights from the very beginning of a new program, we cannot necessarily just dive right into the policy change arena. National decision makers rightly do not listen to everything everyone says, especially from foreign organizations obsessed with changing their countries' policies! If they did, their legal frameworks would quickly become a hodgepodge of conflicting goals, scattered and sometimes inconsistent policies, and confused legality. So if the policymakers are wise, they should only take counsel from people who understand their situation intimately and who will consider all the various objectives that stakeholders may have in the issue.

So, how do we get enough legitimacy to work at scale? One of the most powerful avenues for gaining legitimacy and is a good track record running actual pilot programs, or even better, running larger programs that involve the very same actors who will be essential later for implementing the policy or program at a larger scale. So, for instance, if you are trying to change national forest policy, you need to be a legitimate actor in the eyes of the forest department. And you

need credentials with field level groups. For example, having experience with field-level programs is important for a non-governmental organization's bona fides, especially when those pilots involve officials and staff from the government department itself.

THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF COLLABORATIVE FIELD DESIGN

There are about a half a dozen elements that constitute the core of a field program that consciously and effectively helps to inform policy on a larger scale. I think that influencing the relevant government agency is particularly important, so I focus here on collaborating with government to achieve scale.

The core elements:

- The government agency responsible for the issue at hand must acknowledge that it has a problem and that a new way of doing business is essential. Like the drinker joining Alcoholics Anonymous, the agency must first acknowledge that it even has a problem. If there is no perceived problem, then the government agency will probably not want to change;
- The government agency, if it is a technical one, must acknowledge that the issue at hand needs to go beyond purely technical solutions. The government agency at the center of the issue needs support from other agencies or organizations that have stronger social skills, such as participatory approach skills, community organizing expertise, etc. The types of problems communities face are usually a mix between technical issues and social issues. We are probably dealing with a socio-technical challenge.
- The corollary to acknowledging that it is a socio-technical issue is making concerted, formal attempts to bridge the usual language and conceptual barriers that exist between technical and social actors;
- Inter-organizational working groups are needed at both central and state/provincial levels to experiment with the new concept designs under a range of conditions;
- Some form of continuous field monitoring is necessary;
- Significant in-depth research should accompany the practical work; some of this takes the form of technical studies to overcome specific challenges;
- Policymakers themselves must be brought into the program, or at least made aware of the program, as early as possible. Ideally, they are treated as co-designers and co-owners of the effort from the very beginning;

- Long-term research must monitor how the program is actually carried out in real time and at real scale, and analyze the changes the program undergoes over time;
- The grant-making program officer must act as catalyst and facilitator, not just passive distributor of funds. She or he must help bring together actors who might not otherwise feel they need to work together.

THE PROBLEM FOR THE GOVERNMENT AGENCY

Let's examine each of these elements through two quite successful, but very different, examples: the National Irrigation Administration's Turnover Program in the Philippines, and the Joint Forest Management Program in India.

First is the case of the Philippines National Irrigation Administration (NIA). In the 1980s the Philippines had a mounting problem. Running the country's irrigation systems was costing too much money, and the central treasury was about to cut NIA's budget. So, some NIA irrigation engineers said, "Let's charge irrigation service fees to the farmers." Then some bright people retorted, "That's a good idea, but if we are going to be able to collect any fees, we should provide better service." This led to the obvious (but usually unasked) question, "What kind of service would the farmers be willing to pay for?" Then someone said, "We had better ask them!" "Good idea, but we actually don't know how to ask them," came the reply.

When the central government cut NIA's budget, NIA realized that, indeed, it would need to collect service fees from farmers. Alternatively, in some cases NIA had to withdraw from providing any water management services. In other words, they might turn over some small irrigation systems entirely to the farmers, and even give control of substantial parts of larger systems to farmer groups.

But how to actually do that? The imperative of a shrinking budget served as an immediate and abiding impetus for change. NIA staff were aware that a purely technical solution would not work; it had to be a socio-technical solution. The social nature of the turnover program provided the rationale for bringing in other organizations as collaborators. The financial imperative served as the stimulus for change.

In India, there was a different kind of problem. The State Forest Service in many regions was faced with increasing levels of violence and conflict between people who lived in or near the forest, and the forest contractors and forest department officials. Foresters increasingly found themselves thrust into policing roles, and villagers found themselves increasingly being labeled as thieves, despite the fact that villagers often could refer to longstanding customary use patterns for forest products. Forest contractors were in the middle, muddying things up.

Both sides needed a new way of sharing the fruits of the forest. A compromise that both enabled the government to get revenue from timber and addressed the food, fuel, fodder, and construction needs of poor local communities was needed. The threat of violence—not only loss of life and limb, but also of arson in the forest—became a driver for change. What resulted from this conflict was a system of Joint Forest Management (JFM) in which local communities work in concert with state authorities to steward forest resources. Violence has gone down as community rights became clearer and community income has gone up. It is not a perfect system, but it is a step in the right direction.

Contrast the NIA and JFM situations with a copycat program in Indonesia to turn over small irrigation systems to farmers. Called *Penyerahan irigasi Kecil*, this project was known by its acronym, PIK. In the PIK case, one major difference was that the Indonesian Irrigation Department did not actually have a problem with the current system. Most of the actual management of the myriad of small irrigation systems that exist in the country was already in the hands of the farmers, and the government did not mind. In fact, year after year it submitted inflated, bogus numbers for the area irrigated in these small systems even if the government was not actually involved in managing the system. Indeed, the irrigation engineers had an incentive to exaggerate the figures because they collected money from the central treasury based on the area it claimed it was managing. Never mind that this area included thousands of small systems actually completely in the hands of the farmers.

The irrigation department went even further in claiming specific and inflated irrigated area on the books. A micro-example will serve to illustrate this point. In West Sumatra, in highland Lintau, there is an irrigation system named Bondo Tongah in the village of Koto Nyiur. It is completely farmer-run and the government has invested no resources in it at all. So, even though the government actually has been doing no actual management and had made no improvements, the government claimed on its books that it was a “government system.” My research team and I measured the actual fields irrigated by Bondo Tongah and came up with a figure of 12 hectares. The provincial irrigation department, on the other hand, records the area irrigated as 75 hectares! The *Buku Pintar*, the handbook of the Irrigation Department, was awash with such intentional inaccuracies.

So, because the Irrigation Department collected money based on the area it claimed to be managing nationwide, it actually had a disincentive to turn these systems over to the farmers—or, to be more precise, turn them back to the farmers. Turnover could mean loss of revenue for the department. The farmers in Bondo Tongah did not even know the government was claiming that their irrigation system was a government-managed system! In some other systems the government actually invested in improvements and for larger systems they sometimes installed a gate keeper at the headworks. But even in these systems, the area irrigated was often exaggerated.

The PIK program actually did very little to improve the situation for smallholder farmers, though it did have some benefits in terms of governance. It may have been the first program where the Indonesian government actually gave something back to the people. Up to that point, the government had tried to take over everything—public goods were being usurped by government agencies, and private sector space for the little guy was being increasingly monopolized by the president's family and their business interests. In any case, because very little attention was being paid to increasing crop productivity or reducing the expense of cultivation, this particular irrigation turnover program could hardly be called a poverty alleviation program.

The organizational structure of the PIK program looked a lot like the NIA and JFM cases, but there the similarity ends. NIA and JFM had real problems to solve. The PIK program was mostly smoke and mirrors. By the way, in the end, the Irrigation Department in Indonesia actually deceived the World Bank and its own Finance Ministry. They said they had turned over a large number of small irrigation systems to farmers, but in fact they actually kept many of those systems on the books so they could continue to draw operation and maintenance money for the larger agency. A warden from the Irrigation Department assigned to the Lintau region in West Sumatra acknowledged this to me. He did not know that I had been intimately engaged with the turnover program a few years earlier.

Back to the real cases. In the case of the NIA and the Forest Service in India, meaningful engagement with the problem was possible and, indeed, necessary. In both cases, the government had some real and continuing problems. Second, to solve the government's problem required forming some kind of alliance or collaborative structure between the government's technical agency and other agencies. The government agency needed community organizing expertise, anthropological research skills, and mass mobilization skills. This is where non-governmental organizations come in, or where they actively need to be brought in. Unfortunately, they don't just appear on their own, nor are they always even considered by the government agency. This is something that has to be brokered by an outside agent; in the case of both India and the Philippines it was the Ford Foundation program officer who played the role of broker and convener.

Next, there needs to be some organization with research capability that will follow the program as it evolves. Real-time learning is essential for making any necessary midcourse corrections. This type of real-time learning goes far, far beyond the usual midterm evaluation. Project midterm evaluations are often just compliance exercises to make sure the basic program is proceeding as it was designed, and they often do not challenge or revise the design itself.

Midterm evaluations rarely function as a good mechanism for making radical course corrections and actually improving the program. But in the cases that I'm discussing here today, accompanying monitoring and research, which is sometimes called process documentation research (PDR), was an essential part of the programs. But PDR, or other kinds of accompanying monitoring, needs an

eager audience. That is where the working group (WG) comes in. It makes no sense to collect large amounts of field-level data and to do sophisticated field level analysis through PDR if there's no policymaking audience able to digest the lessons. Similarly, it makes no sense to have a WG if that body receives no information from the field that it can use to learn about field-level issues and use to make course corrections.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY “WORKING GROUP”?

Here I have a very particular definition in mind for *working group*.

“The working group (WG) is an ad hoc interagency body that meets regularly to oversee the implementation of a set of pilot programs that will ultimately be brought to scale. The WG funds selected member of the WG, and operates in a strategic role, one that positions it to contribute to new policy.”

In the case of JFM, a set of new overarching policies was enacted centrally, by the Forest Department with input from the Central JFM Working Group. There were also working groups at state level because states in India have the freedom and power to levy their own ordinances and create their own laws. The state-level working groups mirrored the national level WG in terms of composition. Eventually nearly all the states in India have enacted some type of JFM.

Cultivating functioning working groups is not a simple matter. My experience has been that it often takes up to two years for a working group to fully function seamlessly. In the beginning, there are usually many misunderstandings between the technical agency and its more socially oriented partners. They don't speak each other's disciplinary language. They solve problems differently. They have different motivations for being at the table. They have different institutional drivers behind them. Sometimes the social organizations, even though they have skills in organizing people, or in facilitating dialogue, or in doing things like community mapping, often do not have even the same technical vocabulary that government officers do. Because the government agency is in the driver seat of these programs, this can be a problem. Irrigation engineers and forest officers look down on NGOs that do not have specific technical vocabulary and skills that they themselves have mastered as a requirement for their posts in government service. Sometimes it's necessary to actually train the NGOs in basic technical skills. This is the reason why I worked with Gajah Mada University in Java to develop a short irrigation engineering course specifically for social scientists involved in the PIK program.

Each WG work will work on real-time models of doing things differently. This is critically important because we want the government agency itself to own the program and to continue with it even after the pilot phase is over. When we can change the way the government spends its routine budget, then we are getting

real scale and sustainability. For that reason, any pilot activities need to be undertaken by real government staff, not by NGOs working in isolation from the government. The idea of the isolated pilot project, however innovative, that will somehow attract government's attention and lead to massive change is a rarity indeed. My experience is that government agencies learn best from doing their own work under the actual field conditions that pertain to their work on a daily basis. Governments learn from experimenting with their own staff and modifying familiar systems, not from just being introduced late in the day to other people's experiments and systems.

Similarly, if you are planning study tours, it has been my experience that government staff will learn most readily from experiments going on in other places within their country. This makes sense, because you are holding the political, institutional, and cultural context relatively constant when you stay within the country.

There is, indeed, a role for the foreign study tour. But if you need to take them to another country, it is critical to make sure you know exactly what you want them to learn, and what you don't want them to learn. I think some ill-advised study tours funded by NGOs for Vietnamese officials to visit certain other Asian countries actually led the Vietnamese to pass more restrictive laws pertaining to NGOs than they might otherwise have passed. They learned how to contain NGOs, rather than how to enable NGOs! The moral of that story is plan study tours carefully and be clear about what you want the tour folks to emulate and what you do not want them to pick up, and build those considerations into the way you construct the agenda.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH

The key function of PDR is to put sensitive data on the agenda of the WG in a systematic and dispassionate way. PDR should also identify unanticipated trends and consequences, anomalies, and weaknesses in program design. The PDR can often be very effective in proposing solutions to the problem.

WORKING GROUP FORMATION

Working groups do not form by accident. They have to be brokered into existence. Here is where the program officer from the donor agency has an important role. For example, she or he usually has a major hand in selecting the many accompanying NGOs and the organization(s) that will be doing the PDR.

But there are still hurdles to overcome. Technical government agencies may not initially see the need to include socially oriented organizations, such as national

or local non-profit groups. Remember, too, that staff in technical agencies have chosen to go into those organizations. It is quite common for forest department staff to have entered that line of work because they want to work with trees, not necessarily with people. Staff in an irrigation department have self-selected to be able work with water and concrete, not necessarily with farmers. Staff of the technical organization may look down on the staff of non-technical organizations, because they do not have the same type of technical training.

COMMUNICATIONS AND CHEMISTRY

Given that working groups are not composed of naturally mutually attracted elements, good communications and chemistry usually need to be consciously fostered. Problem solving methods often differ between the socially oriented organizations. Some member of the working group will approach problems in a more quantitative way, thinking about solutions in a convergent way. If you remember one of our recent discussions, convergent thinking breaks a problem down into component parts, solving a larger problem through building on partial solutions. On the other hand, some other WG members might be divergent thinkers. In other words, they will identify relevant corollaries to the problem and ultimately increase the scope of the original issue at hand. Both approaches are often necessary for a holistic view of a problem, and both must be given adequate attention within the WG.

DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE MEMBERS

The technical agency that is the advocacy target in the end is usually the dominant actor in a WG. It holds the budget; it has the implementing capacity and national scope; it makes many of the policies we want modified. Change on the ground at scale depends on successful change in this technical organization (for example, the Irrigation Department or the Forest Service). As a result, we assume that the technical agency is the dominant actor in a WG. Socially oriented agencies, like NGOs—even centrally placed NGOs with national scope—are often not very powerful compared to the technical agency.

So, what are the consequences of this? From the perspective of the technical agency, the social organization has few technical skills, no real budget, and no implementing capacity, other than perhaps community organizing. The technical agency can easily dismiss the social organization as irrelevant or not believe its reports from the field, especially if they are negative. How can we make the playing field more level?

Here's where we must look again at the composition of the WG. There should be at least three entities that can advocate for the people we want to help. First is the local NGO and farmers' organizations themselves. Second is the group doing the process documentation research work. That group is best chosen from the ranks of international organizations or academia, or national think tanks. That group may have Ph.Ds and command greater respect than the social organization. Finally, there is the donor program officer. In some WG's, that role will be filled by the Oxfam program officer. Together, these three entities form a type of countervailing force to the otherwise unchecked power of the technical agency. For example, suppose the social organization, in the process of doing its community organizing work, discovers cases of shoddy workmanship in some sites. If it is serious enough, that social organization may alert the group doing the PDR to have a look to corroborate the story. Then, armed with corroborating testimony, the social organization can bring the topic up at the next WG meeting. If this or other data are very sensitive, the issue can be brought up in private, but again with the confirming testimony of the PDR group.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE PROGRAM OFFICER

One of the hardest tasks involved in complex, multi-agency efforts is ensuring the accountability of all the actors. For a program officer working alone, this could be nearly impossible. But this is where the structure of the WG can help.

The WG comes together for a reason—to oversee the implementation and modification of a major trial program that may be further adapted and turned into a nationwide program. The WG meets regularly. The NIA working group met every two weeks at the beginning and then every two months several years later.

Whether we are talking about the early days or about the very mature phases of the program, each of the WG members must know exactly what they need to accomplish and by when. The other members of the WG are quite good at reminding each other of the work plan and the deadlines, and demanding that the time limits and quality standards are met. This eases the burden on the donor program officer immensely. The technical agency is usually the chair of the WG, so it usually falls to the technical agency to enforce standards and time tables.

Moving forward, we need to focus on different types of interlinked interventions, and at multiple levels. As we become One Oxfam, we can use our historically different experience with different types of partners and at different levels in order to complement ongoing work. By building new jointly owned programs as part of the second iteration of Joint Country Analysis and Strategy (JCAS), which corresponds to what I earlier called the Program Strategy Paper, we can strengthen our efforts to promote systemic change and address the lack of justice to get at the root of poverty.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- How does an NGO avoid being co-opted by a government agency when some type of working group is formed?
- How does one go from a change in policy to actually getting the government to spend its routine budget differently?
- What kind of drivers are needed to keep experts and new implementation modes to continue?

INSIDE COVER PHOTOS

All photos by John Ambler unless otherwise noted.

FRONT (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)

Mali (c. 2005), NGO leader *Jeff Ashe*

India, Rajasthan (1995) Chain pot irrigation (ancient irrigation technique)

Mozambique (c. 2005), woman and baby

Indonesia, West Sumatra, Lintau (1986), Children

India, Rajasthan (1995) Archimedes screw (ancient irrigation technique)

East Timor (c. 2004), ancient storage technique for maize

India, Rajasthan (c. 1995) Jaisalmer. Camels loading up drinking water

Bamako, Mali (c. 2005) NGO leader

BACK (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)

Nepal, Kathmandu Valley (c. 2003), Sawyer

India, New Delhi (1994) Tamil coming of age ceremony

India, Calcutta (2004) "Working girl union"

Indonesia, Bali, (1988) Harvested rice bundles

India, Ladakh (c.1994) Irrigated fields

Nepal (c. 1986) Thakali girl

Afghanistan, Shomali province, male elders sitting for a meeting discussing relief,
June 2001

Indonesia, West Sumatra, Lintau (1985) harvest time





John Ambler, Oxfam's former VP of programs, shares some of his hard-won lessons from a career in development: lessons about everyday life in a village, about values, resources, power, and about politics—local, national, and global.

John learned about the importance of context and local wisdom when evaluating ideas imported by idealistic and often naïve outsiders. He also learned—from his own failures and others'—that simple models of development hatched in university research centers seldom yield their intended results in communities. John is possessed of the "gift of doubt," and has used this gift throughout his career to question the fundamental assumptions of development. Yet, he has never been driven by doubt, or cynicism, to reject development efforts. Rather, he has embraced with humility and respect all those who toil in hope for a better world.

COVER: Celery seedlings grown by a family in Sembalun village, ready for transplantation to their own fields. In other parts of Indonesia, farmers purchase seedlings from nurseries. Sembalun and communities like it have fewer cash resources, so many more stages of production are within the family. *Harjono Djoyobisono / Oxfam*