



**RESEARCHING  
WOMEN'S  
COLLECTIVE  
ACTION**

**End of Project  
Evaluation Report**

**Gavin Stedman-Bryce**



## About this document

This evaluation was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and commissioned by Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam). The evaluation consultant developed the interview guide and conducted the interviews, analysed and interpreted the data, and wrote the report. Oxfam staff designed the evaluation, provided primary data and reviewed the draft report. The funder had no role in the evaluation design, data gathering, analysis, and interpretation, or the presentation of findings.



**RESEARCHING WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE  
ACTION PROJECT**

**Evaluation Report**



# CONTENTS

Acronyms.....	A
List of Figures.....	A
List of Tables.....	A
Executive Summary.....	I
Purpose and Overview of the Report.....	3
<b>1.0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Collective Action in the Agricultural Market Context.....	5
1.2 Aims of the RWCA Project.....	6
1.3 Design and Structure of the RWCA Project.....	6
1.3.1 Project Governance.....	9
<b>2.0 Evaluating the Researching Women’s Collective Action Project.....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Key Informant Interviews.....	11
2.2 Project Documentation.....	11
2.3 Key Informant Online Survey.....	12
2.4 Data Analysis.....	12
2.5 Validity of Findings.....	12
2.6 Limitations.....	12
<b>3.0 Key Findings.....</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 Project Relevance.....	13
3.2 Project Effectiveness.....	16
3.2.1 Research Findings.....	16
3.2.2 Effectiveness of Communication and Influencing Activities.....	19
3.2.2.1 Communications Activities.....	20
3.2.2.2 Evidence of Influencing Development Actors and Others.....	21
3.3 Key Decisions Affecting the Project.....	25
3.4 Project Efficiency.....	27
3.4.1 Project Timeline.....	28
3.4.2 Delivering Results.....	28
3.4.3 Project Budget.....	29
3.4.4 Project and Research Management.....	29
3.5 Identified Areas of Good Practice.....	30
3.6 Lessons Learnt.....	31
<b>4.0 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Annex I: Key Informants.....	34
Annex II: Question Guide for Key Informant Interviews.....	35

# ACRONYMS

<b>BMGF</b>	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
<b>CA</b>	Collective Action
<b>CBO</b>	Community Based Organisation
<b>GEM</b>	Gendered Enterprise and Markets Initiative
<b>IAG</b>	International Advisory Group
<b>IDS</b>	Institute of Development Studies
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>LSHTM</b>	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>RWCA</b>	Researching Women's Collective Action
<b>SILCS</b>	Saving and Internal Lending Communities
<b>SOAS</b>	School of Oriental and African Studies
<b>SSA</b>	Sub-Saharan Africa
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNWOMEN</b>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
<b>WCA</b>	Women's Collective Action

# LIST OF FIGURES

<b>BOX 1:</b>	RWCA Project's Vision of Success	6
<b>BOX 2:</b>	Phases of the RWCA Project	7
<b>BOX 3:</b>	Research Questions	8
<b>BOX 4:</b>	Agricultural Sub-Sector by Focal Country	9
<b>BOX 5:</b>	Key Research Findings	17
<b>BOX 6:</b>	Stated Project Objectives and Outcomes	19

# LIST OF TABLES

<b>FIGURE 1:</b>	Project Timeline	27
------------------	------------------	----



**OXFAM**

© Dave Clark/Oxfam

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Smallholder farming is an important livelihood activity which offers one of the best hopes for a sustainable route out of poverty for multitudes living in developing countries.**

**Smallholder farmers face numerous challenges to accessing and flourishing in agricultural markets. This is particularly true for marginalised smallholders who are vulnerable to environmental and climatic shocks and who face power imbalances that limit their potential. Women smallholders, for example, face entrenched gender inequalities that limit their scope for accessing and engaging in agricultural markets, with factors such as weak control over assets and poor access to services and support, among some of the constraints they commonly face.**

In this context, development actors promote collective action as a critical strategy for smallholders in overcoming various challenges in accessing markets and value chains. Collective action in agricultural markets may take the form of rural producer groups, farmers' associations, savings and credit groups and agricultural co-operatives, for example.

While collective action holds great promise for millions of smallholders, gaps in understanding among development actors persist about which strategies are most effective at delivering gender equitable outcomes. The majority of support for collective action in agricultural markets has largely favoured men, with women's collective action more usually related to health and literacy, and savings and credit, among others. The need to simply recognise smallholder women at all is an important prerequisite for development actors in understanding the importance of research about which forms of collective action work best for women.

As an area of study, women's collective action in markets remains relatively naïve, with many important questions unanswered. For development actors, including governments, providing support to market-based formal producer organisations without understanding collective action formation from a gendered perspective, is likely to neglect women's needs and threatens exacerbating gender inequalities.

To support a deepening of understanding of women's collective action in markets, Oxfam with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Researching Women's Collective Action

## KEY FINDINGS

- The RWCA Project has illuminated a research domain that has hitherto suffered from a dearth of rigorous evidence.
- The Project has been effective in producing research outputs of a quality that will optimise their dissemination and uptake.
- Available evidence suggests that the Project has fallen short in delivering its planned influencing outcomes.
- The Project overall was inefficient in some key areas affecting the Project's budget and timeline.
- Oxfam's decision to disband the Women's Livelihoods Team, has generated concern that the momentum built up by the Project to influence will be lost.
- It remains to be seen what plans Oxfam has in place to ensure the dissemination of the Project's findings.

Project. The 3 year project sought to address a number of knowledge gaps through systematic research of the interaction between gender and collective action in selected agricultural markets in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania. The vision of the project was to influence Oxfam's programmes in the 3 research countries, based on evidence of the necessary conditions and most effective strategies for enabling women's collection action.

With the project ending in December 2012, this independent, summative evaluation was commissioned by Oxfam as part of its shared commitments and goals with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and in keeping with Oxfam's ambitions to continuous improvement and learning. The evaluation sought to assess the project's relevance, efficiency and effectiveness; to identify key decisions during the project's lifetime and their impact; as well as to identify lessons learnt and areas of good practice. The evaluation was conducted between November and December 2012.

The immediate beneficiaries of this project are those development actors engaged in agricultural development, principally Oxfam programmes in the 3 research countries. Unlike a traditional development intervention, as a research project it was not designed to deliver immediate improvements to the lives of women smallholders. The Project was an exercise in learning from women about the various contexts and circumstances in which they engaged in collective action, its forms and what benefits, if any, they derived from it.

The evaluation has found that the project's research findings are highly relevant to a range of stakeholders, including: women smallholders; donors; and development actors who are engaged in agricultural development with a focus on sustainable livelihoods and gender equitable outcomes. Other factors such as strong economic growth on the African continent and the priorities of donors and development actors, provides fertile ground for the project's research findings.

The evaluation identified a number of areas of good practice including a well thought through stakeholder engagement plan which fostered communication pathways between the various levels of the project, from national to global levels. The project's International Advisory Group was praised for being an incredibly important reference point, drawing from the high calibre of expertise within its membership. An open and supportive relationship with the project's sponsor, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, was appreciated by key informants in supporting the project in overcoming challenges when they occurred.

While beyond the scope of the evaluation to provide an expert opinion of the project's research findings, views from key informants portray a high level of confidence in the quality and rigor of the project's research approach and results. The overall management and research management of the project has been

praised with many key informants feeling moved to express how much they enjoyed being part of the project and being at the forefront of such an exciting research topic. The findings are viewed by many as being 'cutting edge', illuminating a research domain that has hitherto suffered from a dearth of rigorous evidence.

More is now known about the various forms of women's collective action, the agricultural sub-sectors in which it does and does not occur; women's motivations for engaging in collective action; the socio-economic profile of those women who benefit and those who do not; its impact on women's income, social status and empowerment; and a range of approaches and strategies that governments and development actors can take to optimise economic and empowerment benefits for women engaged in collective action in markets.

Signs of the research findings beginning to influence Oxfam's programmatic thinking, approaches and strategies are still nascent but evidence of an influencing effect is apparent. There is still much distance to travel, however. To maintain the momentum generated by the project, Oxfam must think carefully about how it will ensure uptake of the research findings given its decision to disband the very team that has led the project.



© Caroline Gluck/Oxfam

Disbanding the team which has the best hope of supporting the dissemination of the project's findings and supporting their translation into improved approaches and strategies, has left a considerable gap in the minds of key informants who are concerned about 'next steps' for the project.

The reality of managing complex and large-scale projects often requires managers to take difficult decisions. In the case of the Researching Women's Collective Action Project, a decision to terminate its contract with the project's initial research partner, viewed to be the best decision for the project, unfortunately led to a number of other challenges which forced the project over-budget and over-time, reducing its overall efficiency on a number of fronts. No impact on the quality of the research outputs were reported but pressures of time and budget were keenly felt by many. This created an environment of increased workload and intensity which pervaded the entire Project, with several Oxfam staff being moved into job roles that took them away from their areas of expertise.

This has been an illuminating project with credible, quality outputs based upon rigorous research. The project was found to have some inefficiencies but in the most part key informants felt that decisions which may have increased the project's budget or extended its timeline were justified and reasonable to safeguard the quality of the research outputs. Translating the project's research findings into improved development programming remains a challenge for the project, with stakeholders keen to maintain momentum. Understanding 'next steps' for the project is therefore of paramount importance to maximise uptake of the research outputs by development actors.

## PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

This independent, end of project evaluation was commissioned by Oxfam GB (Oxfam) as part of its shared commitments and goals with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and in keeping with Oxfam's ambitions to continuous improvement and learning. The report contains findings from an evaluation of the Researching Women's Collective Action Project, a 3 year research project (Dec 2009- Dec 2012) lead by Oxfam, conducted in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania.

Oxfam and the BMGF are the intended primary audiences for this report. As is Oxfam policy, the report will be made available via their website to facilitate access to its content for other interested parties, including those who participated in the project – such as the International Advisory Group (IAG).

The report is structured in 4 main parts as follows:

### Part 1

Introduces the Project and includes important background information about its intended purpose, design and governance structure;

### Part 2

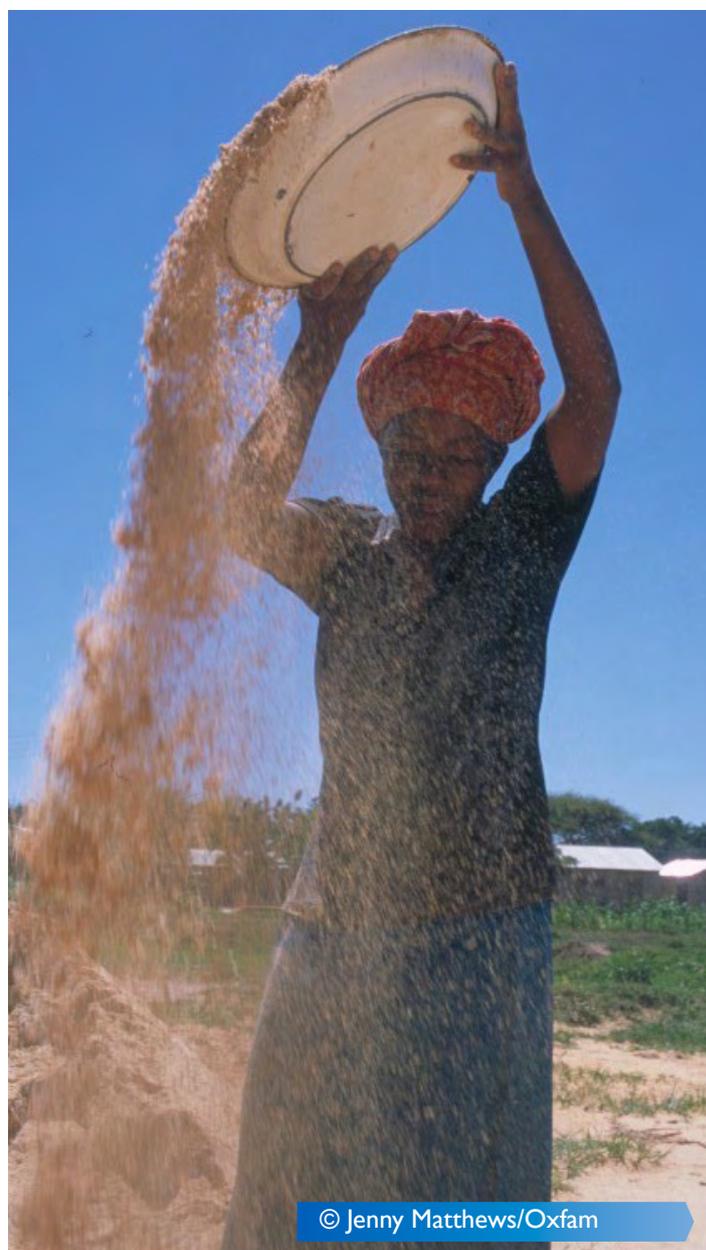
Outlines the methods used to conduct the evaluation;

### Part 3

Describes the main results of the evaluation; and

### Part 4

Concludes with a synthesis of the main findings of the evaluation.



© Jenny Matthews/Oxfam





**OXFAM**

© Tom Pietrasik/Oxfam

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

**Like many development actors, Oxfam believes one of the best ways to help lift people out of poverty is to support them to find sustainable livelihoods. Given that most poor people live in rural areas, smallholder farming is an important livelihood activity, offering one of the best hopes for a sustainable route out of poverty for multitudes. Investing in agricultural development therefore is an urgent policy priority for development actors focused on sustainable development.**

There are many challenges to accessing and flourishing in agricultural markets in developing countries, particularly for marginalised smallholders who are vulnerable to environmental and climatic shocks and who face power imbalances that limit their potential. This is particularly true for women smallholders who face entrenched gender inequalities that limit their scope for accessing and engaging in agricultural markets. A major strategy for donors, governments, Oxfam and other development actors has been to support the development of producer organisations and other forms of collective action to address these power imbalances.

Despite an increasing number of women smallholders who are engaged in agricultural markets – women’s work accounts for up to 80 per cent of the food produced, processed, stored and marketed in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) <sup>[1]</sup> – this too often does not translate into increased income or improved decision-making capacity. Women face numerous challenges including, but not limited to: poor access to services and support, such as agricultural extension; weak control over assets, such as capital, land and labour; and are often time poor – especially younger women – having to devote a large proportion of their day to gathering water, preparing meals and performing care-giving roles.

One critical strategy for women smallholders in this context is collective action. The majority of support for women’s collective action has been related to savings and credit, production, and literacy and health, while support for agricultural markets groups has usually benefited men. Collective action in markets has the potential to benefit smallholders in numerous ways, including by facilitating access to: information, technology and training; resources, such as storage and equipment; finance; and can assist in reducing costs and increasing bargaining power.

### 1.1 Collective Action in the Agricultural Market Context

Collective action has been the focus of research in a number of disciplines, with early descriptions of collective action initially appearing in the social movement literature. Common components of collective action include: (a) the involvement of a group of people; (b) a shared interest; and, (c) some form of common action.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the agricultural market context, collective action could be defined as: an on-going group activity, which may be formal or informal, involving women acting separately, or together with men, with a shared purpose of promoting their role as direct actors in specific agricultural markets or of accessing services that enable access to specific markets.<sup>[3]</sup> Collective action in agricultural markets can take the form of rural producer groups, farmers’ associations, savings and credit groups and agricultural co-operatives, for example.

While collective action holds great promise for millions of smallholders whose primary livelihoods are dependent on their

ability to farm the land and access markets, gaps in understanding among development actors persist about which strategies are most effective at delivering gender equitable outcomes. The need to simply recognise smallholder women at all is an important prerequisite for development actors in understanding the importance of research about which forms of collective action work best for women.

Women's collective action (WCA) in this context remains a poorly understood mechanism through which women smallholders gain access to and engage in agricultural markets. WCA as an area of study remains relatively naïve, resting at the intersection of other research domains. Questions abound, such as: which categories of women smallholders participate in collective action in agricultural markets and why? What economic and wider benefits do women smallholders gain from their participation in collective action in agricultural markets? And which strategies of development actors are most effective in promoting equitable benefits for women from their engagement in collective action in agricultural markets?

To provide answers to these questions, among others, Oxfam

with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, (BMGF) launched a research project in December 2009 in 3 SSA countries (Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania) - known as the Researching Women's Collective Action (RWCA) Project.

## 1.2 Aims of the RWCA Project

The RWCA Project sought to address a number of knowledge gaps through systematic research of the interaction between gender and collective action in selected markets. By focusing on identifying the various conditions under which women are able to benefit from collective action in agricultural markets, the Project's ambition was to highlight and promote strategies that are effective for WCA and use this rigorous evidence to influence Oxfam and other development actors, to adjust their approaches and tools. More than purely research; influencing development actors thinking, approaches and strategies were hard-wired into the Project's ambition. The vision: Oxfam's programmes in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania adapt how they support rural producer organisations, based on evidence of the necessary conditions and most effective strategies for enabling women's collective action (See Box 1).

### Box 1: RWCA Project's Vision of Success

Vision of Success	
In 3 years, Oxfam programmes in Ethiopia, Mali, and Tanzania will adopt changes in their practice of support to rural producer organisations, based on evidence of the necessary conditions and most effective strategies for enabling women's collective action across at least three key agricultural sub-sectors.	
Overall Objective	
Oxfam and other development actors use rigorous evidence to adjust approaches and tools to support rural women producer's effective collective action in key agricultural sub-sectors in sub-Saharan Africa.	
Long-term Objectives	
1. To contribute to an understanding of how women's participation in different forms of collective action in agricultural markets in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Mali can contribute to improvements in their incomes, control over assets and influence over decision-making at the household, community and farmer organisation level.	
2. To identify effective innovations and strategies in support of effective women's collective action in agricultural markets in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania.	
3. To develop approaches to promote the adoption of innovations and more effective strategies to support women's collective action in agricultural markets among Oxfam programmes, partners and wider platforms of stakeholders in Ethiopia, Mali, and Tanzania.	

## 1.3 Design and Structure of the RWCA Project

Originally conceived as a 2 phase, 24 month research project, it was later redesigned to be a 3 phase research project implemented over a 36 month period (Discussed more in Section 3.5). The 3 research phases are outlined in Box 2 below.

The RWCA Project was informed by a conceptual framework that acted as an analytical tool. The conceptual framework depicted which factors influence how effective collective action can be for women smallholders engaging in markets and how these factors interact. The framework was revisited and revised throughout the Project.<sup>[4]</sup>



## Box 2: Phases of the RWCA Project

Phase I	<p>Focused on identifying key sub-sectors where women’s collective action has the potential to deliver benefits in agricultural markets, and doing a preliminary mapping and inventory of collective action in these subsectors.</p>	
	<p>This phase focused on stakeholder engagement and scoping research through mapping and inventory of women’s collective action to support the development of a typology.</p>	<p><b>Key Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive global literature review.</li> <li>• Stakeholder dialogues identified sub-sectors for research which were then mapped for WCA.</li> <li>• Produced initial inventory of WCA in each sub-sector.</li> </ul>
Phase II	<p>Consisted of analysis that focused on the gender dynamics and benefits of collective action within and across the selected agricultural sub-sectors identified in Phase I.</p>	
	<p><b>Research Questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where does collective action occur in each sub-sector, and what form does it take?</li> <li>• What benefits do women gain from engaging in collective action?</li> <li>• How do these benefits vary with the type of collective action, and why?</li> <li>• How does collective action, and the benefits that women derive from it, vary between sub-sectors?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Key Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended country literature reviews and secondary data review.</li> <li>• Qualitative field research mainly based on focus groups in four communities per agricultural sub-sector in each region.</li> <li>• Analysis within and across sub-sectors for each region and country.</li> </ul>
Phase III	<p>Quantitative and qualitative analysis of a few sub-sectors, and developing case studies of ‘effective collective action.’ Sharing and influencing with other development actors.</p>	
	<p><b>Research Questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which categories of women smallholders benefit from participation in collective action in agricultural markets?</li> <li>• What livelihoods (income, assets) and empowerment benefits do women smallholders gain from their participation in collective action in agricultural markets?</li> <li>• How and to what extent does collective action help women smallholders to overcome key barriers to their engagement in markets?</li> <li>• Which strategies of development actors are most effective in promoting equitable benefits for women from their engagement in CA in agricultural markets?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Key Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature review on effective strategies for supporting WCA.</li> <li>• Review of existing evidence within Oxfam and among partners.</li> <li>• In-depth quantitative survey of households/ women involved in collective action.</li> <li>• Case studies to investigate and document effective strategies and the success factors that underpin them.</li> </ul>

Three countries in SSA were selected to provide scope for comparison: Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania. Within each country 2 regions were selected for study. The choice of these three countries in SSA was informed by:

- **The prevalence of rural poverty; of the 35 million people in Tanzania, 75 per cent live in rural areas and many of the rural poor are smallholders;<sup>[5]</sup>**
- **The dominance of smallholder agriculture in their agricultural economies;**
- **Relative stability in the political context;**
- **The presence of significant Oxfam agricultural programme initiatives and the willingness of local teams to engage with the research process; and**
- **Favourable conditions for research in terms of data availability and capacity of in-country research partners.**

The research used a mixed methods approach, employing qualitative and quantitative methods, covering both mixed sex and women only forms of collective action, but limited its scope to CA directly linked to agricultural markets.

The overall research question the project sought to answer was (See Box 3 below for additional research questions):

**To what extent and under what conditions does women smallholder's engagement in market-focused collective action lead to gender equitable outcomes?**

### BOX 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **Which categories of women smallholders participate in collective action in agricultural markets and why?**
- **What economic and wider benefits do women smallholders gain from their participation in collective action in agricultural markets?**
- **How and to what extent does collective action help women smallholders to overcome key barriers to their engagement in markets?**
- **Which strategies of development actors are most effective in promoting equitable benefits for women from their engagement in collective action in agricultural markets**

To answer the project's research questions, data was gathered across 4 key dimensions:

- The legal and policy context;
- Market structure and dynamics of the chosen agricultural sub-sectors;
- WCA and associated interventions; and
- Individual women and their households.

The qualitative research had a number of foci, including: identifying sub-sectors (product markets) where women were significantly engaged and market demand was expanding (phase I); ranking the benefits of collective action; linkages between informal and formal groups; and identifying the most significant barriers to markets and whether or not these were being addressed by collective action groups.

The qualitative research also used a technique known as 'positive exceptions'. This technique was utilised to understand what could be learnt about the particular circumstances and conditions under which women engaged in collective action benefitted, both economically and in terms of empowerment benefits. Across the 3 focal countries, 4 positive exceptions were identified per country, resulting in 12 qualitative case studies.

The quantitative research was implemented in the same districts as the qualitative research and aimed to rigorously compare each of the agricultural sub-sectors across the 3 focal countries using treatment and control groups. Treatment groups comprised women involved in collective action and the control groups comprised women active in the same agricultural sub-sectors but who were not members of formal collective action groups. Approximately 900 women per country were included in the sample of which approximately 300 were in the treatment group and 600 were in the control group (Total, 270,069). To facilitate rigorous comparison, a two-step propensity score matching approach was used with communities matched by development domains and individual women matched by socio-economic factors.<sup>[6]</sup>

From identification of 3 agricultural sub-sectors per region per country (6 per country; 18 in total), a process of refinement, through on-going engagement with stakeholders at national and regional dialogue events, enabled the identification of one agricultural sub-sector per country for in-depth analysis (See Box 4). The process which led to the eventual selection targeted those sub-sectors where women were known to be economically active with some control over the benefits of their activity; where there were significant and expanding market opportunities; and where there was evidence that collective action was occurring at different levels of the value chain.



## Box 4: Agricultural Sub-Sectors by Focal Country

Focal Country	Study Regions	Agricultural Sub-Sectors identified in Phase I (n=15)	Agricultural Sub-Sectors identified in Phase II for study in Phase III
Ethiopia	West Gojam, Ahmara	Dairy Honey Vegetables	Honey
	Jimma, Oromia	Coffee Maize Spices	
Mali	Koulikoro	Groundnuts Millet/Sorghum Sesame	Shea Butter
	Sikasso	Rice Shea Butter Tiger Nuts	
Tanzania	Tanga	Allenblackia Maize Vegetables	Vegetables
	Shinyanga	Chick Peas Local Chicken Rice	

### 1.3.1 Project Governance

The RWCA Project was explicitly developed as a research, communications and influencing initiative to ensure that evidence gathered throughout the research piece was translated into changes in the thinking and practices of development actors. In its original conception the Project was to be delivered jointly by Oxfam in partnership with a research partner. The research partner's role was as research manager, providing overall research leadership, with Oxfam using its experience and expertise to lead the communications and influencing piece of the Project. Changes to the research management of the Project are discussed in [Section 3.3](#).

Overall project management was overseen by Oxfam staff based in Oxford, UK. At country level, each focal country had a country lead (Oxfam staff member) who facilitated co-ordination between project management staff in Oxford and research teams in-country. In the first year, the research manager contracted and managed the in-country research teams. The country leads were responsible for in-country stakeholder engagement, influencing and communications. There were difficulties with two parallel management lines, thus in Phases II and III country leads

were involved in recruitment and contracting of country-based researchers, which increased their accountability to country leads and overall co-ordination of the project.

An International Advisory Group (IAG) was established, comprising development researchers and practitioners drawn from leading development organisations, including key Oxfam staff (13 members in total).<sup>[7]</sup> The IAG's purpose was to ensure the relevance and coherence of the Project and the quality and credibility of its outputs, to widen the impact of the Project on development thinking and practice. Additionally, the IAG provided the Project with: quality assurance over research outputs; peer review; links with wider communities of practice and research; and acted as a champion for the research, supporting dissemination of findings. The IAG was formally convened 3 times over the lifetime of the project and consulted twice more (See timeline in [Section 3.4](#)).

Stakeholder groups in each country were convened each year at national and regional (sub-national) levels. Co-convenor organisations helped publicise, recruit and facilitate these events, and participants were involved in consultation and decision-making about the choice of sub-sectors for research and validation of findings.





**OXFAM**

© Tom Pietrasik/Oxfam

## 2.0 EVALUATING THE RESEARCHING WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE ACTION PROJECT

This independent, end of project, summative evaluation was commissioned by Oxfam as part of its shared commitments and goals with the BMGF and in keeping with Oxfam's ambition to continuous improvement and learning.

The evaluation was interested in the following aspects:

1. **Assessment of the Project's relevance, efficiency, and effectiveness (including results);**
2. **Identification of key lessons and good practices with regard to strategies, outputs and approaches; and**
3. **Identifying key decisions, adaptations and changes of course during the lifetime of the Project to assess the quality of those decisions.**

The evaluation was conducted between November and December 2012 and was completed within 21 days. The evaluation was conducted within the maximum capacity of time and resources available. Any limitations resulting from time and resource constraints are discussed in [Section 2.6](#) below.

The evaluation used mixed methods but relied principally on qualitative methods of inquiry with some quantitative analysis of key informant survey data. The evaluation approach was agreed by Oxfam following the submission of an inception report in early November by the evaluator.

Evidence for the evaluation was drawn from the following sources:

- **Oral testimony from key informants;**
- **Project documentation; and**
- **An online survey completed by key informants.**

### 2.1 Key Informant Interviews

Oxfam was responsible for identifying all key informants for this evaluation, guided by the evaluator to prioritise 'information-rich' cases. The evaluator was provided with a list of 24 key informants all of whom were invited to take part in the evaluation. The evaluator sent all informants an initial invite and followed this with 2 separate email reminders, when required. The response rate was 62.5 per cent (contacted/interviewed; 24/15). A list of all key informants who were interviewed for this evaluation is available in [Annex I](#).

All key informants were provided with an information leaflet to inform them about the evaluation, their role in it and details regarding confidentiality. Interviews were conducted by telephone or Skype and generally lasted up to 60 minutes. A questionnaire was used to guide the interviews and contained 15 open-ended, neutral questions ([Annex II](#)). Interviews were digitally recorded with the informed consent of all key informants. Audio files were then transcribed verbatim into Word document format in readiness for analysis.<sup>[6]</sup>

### 2.2 Project Documentation

Documentation for the evaluation came exclusively from the Project and was either downloaded directly from the Project's Wiki website, or supplied by Oxfam. All Project documentation was initially indexed to quantify the volume of material. A total of 174 items were indexed, including: 112 Word Documents; 29 PDF Documents; 20 Powerpoint Presentations; 10 Excel Spread Sheets; and 3 videos. As it was not feasible to read and analyse

all 174 items (limitations are discussed below in section 2.6), the evaluator requested that Oxfam staff prioritise items in terms of their relevance to the evaluation process. This resulted in 89 documents and other items being identified as relevant, all of which were included in the evaluation.

## 2.3 Key Informant Online Survey

To work around limitations of budget which capped the number of key informant interviews the evaluator could conduct, an online survey was developed to facilitate the inclusion of views from a broader range of key informants, as well as asking additional questions not included in the key stakeholder interviews. A total of 54 individuals were invited to take part in the online survey, including all key informants who were interviewed by the evaluator. In total, 18 key informants completed the survey (response rate 33 per cent), of which 12 had previously been interviewed by the evaluator. Hence, the online survey increased the total number of key informants involved in the evaluation by 6 cases (43 per cent).

## 2.4 Data Analysis

All qualitative data, including all documentation and transcripts from key informant interviews were systematically coded using Nvivo10 qualitative software <sup>[10]</sup>, to support a rigorous and consistent approach to data analysis. Qualitative data analysis was done by coding and classifying recurring regularities in the data around particular emerging themes. During the coding process the evaluator regularly assessed coding categories to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (convergence and divergence).

## 2.5 Validity of Findings

To strengthen the validity of findings the evaluation used triangulation in the following ways: using multiple data sources; and multiple methods of data collection. Other methods of triangulation, such as using multiple evaluators and repeating observations over time have not been possible due to the limitations discussed below.

The report was validated to strengthen the accuracy of its findings, including the reasonableness of its interpretations with Project stakeholders during the drafting phase.

## 2.6 Limitations

The single biggest limitation in this evaluation was time, related to the evaluation budget. The evaluation of this complex, 3 year, multi-country research project was conducted in just 21 days.

There was a substantial amount of documentary evidence to assess in this evaluation with a relatively small amount of

time for analysis (3 days). As described in Section 2.2 above, a prioritisation exercise was conducted by Oxfam staff to assist the evaluator in identifying the most relevant documents and other items (e.g. videos, spread sheets) to include in the evaluation. It should be noted therefore, that this evaluation has only been able to assess approximately half of available Project Documentation and what was assessed was done with Oxfam's direction.

As key informant interviews had to be conducted by telephone, or in some cases by Skype, interviews with key informants from Africa suffered due to poor line quality and in some cases calls had to be abandoned and tried on other occasions. Unfortunately in some cases interviews had to be abandoned altogether (n=2). This may have introduced some bias as most key informants were based in the Global North (n=10; 67 per cent).

Non-verbal communication is an important part of general communication that is lost when conducting interviews via telephone. It can also cause challenges when conducting interviews with key informants whose first language is not English, clarifying questions are therefore very important. However, with these challenges, interviews often took longer and in many cases it was not possible to ask key informants the full range of interview questions in the time available.

Finally, at the time of the evaluation, the Project had not fully come to an end and final results were still being validated among the Project team. While the evaluation will discuss the research results of the Project therefore, it should be recognised that results are not yet published and may be subject to alteration.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Strengthening Women's Livelihoods through Collective Action – A literature Review (2010). Available: <http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Literature+reviews>, accessed November 2012.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Synthesis of Preliminary Findings from Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania, Phase II (2011). Available: <http://womenscollectiveaction.com/file/view/Women%27s+Collective+Action+Phase+II+synthesis+paper+Oct+2011.pdf>, accessed November 2012.
- 4 The conceptual framework can be viewed here: <http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Conceptual+framework+overview>
- 5 Jarco Consulting, 2009
- 6 For a fuller description of the methods used in the RWCA Project see...
- 7 Learn more about the IAG here: <http://womenscollectiveaction.com/International+Advisory+Group>
- 8 Time allocated to this activity: 8 days (38 per cent of available time).
- 9 Time allocated to this activity: 3 days (14 per cent of available time).
- 10 For more information see: [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx)



OXFAM

© Tom Pietrasik/Oxfam

## 3.0 KEY FINDINGS

Key findings from the evaluation are presented in the following 6 sections:

**Section 3.1** assesses the relevance of the Project to ensure its objectives are consistent with the priorities of beneficiaries, donors and development actors;

**Section 3.2** describes the results of the Project and assesses to what extent the Project has achieved its desired outcomes;

**Section 3.3** identifies a number of key decisions made during the lifetime of the project and assesses the impact and quality of those decisions;

**Section 3.4** examines how efficiently the Project transformed its inputs into outputs;

**Section 3.5** identifies areas of good practice in relation to the strategies and approaches used by the Project; and finally

**Section 3.6** describes a range of challenges faced and lessons learnt during the lifetime of the project.

### 3.1 Project Relevance

OECD/DAC evaluation guidelines define relevance as the extent to which the objectives of a development activity are consistent with beneficiaries' requirements, country needs, global priorities and partners' and donors' policies.<sup>[1]</sup> As this is an end of project evaluation, assessing relevance retrospectively, the focus becomes whether the objectives of the Project are still appropriate given any changes in circumstances since its inception. The evaluation has sought to understand the Project's relevance from a number of stakeholder perspectives and how they will use the Project's findings.

Numerous development actors' policies prioritise initiatives that promote gender equitable outcomes that enhance women's sustainable livelihoods, including: Oxfam; Care; multi-lateral organisations, such as UNWOMEN; and academic institutions such as IDS, LSHTM and SOAS, to name a few. While clearly a policy priority for development actors, the Project's objectives were designed to address significant gaps in their understanding about the most effective strategies for engaging women in collective action in markets which lead to increases in their incomes/assets and as a means of empowerment. Addressing these knowledge gaps is recognised as an important precursor in helping to shape how interventions are designed and implemented to optimise relevance to women smallholders.

“I think [the Project is] highly relevant, there is a huge interest amongst other organisations in Tanzania and in other countries about gender issues in agriculture, about value chains and particularly how value chains work, or do not work for women. So it is incredibly relevant and I am very optimistic that the research will help us not only in Oxfam but other development, research and policy institutions to improve their strategies.”

**Key Informant**

“I think that this research is very cutting edge. Everyone is trying to organise farmers in order to enable them to gain greater access to markets...and everyone is trying to empower women within these groups. But questions that practitioners involved in this work have about how you actually empower women within these groups are widespread.”

Key Informant

“There wasn’t any research that looked at this issue until we started it. It was really exciting to see how much relevance it had and how many people were interested in it.”

Key Informant

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation allocates approximately one-fifth of its total budget to agricultural development, providing grants along the whole agricultural market value chain. Of this investment, the Foundation devotes around 65 per cent to catalysing support for smallholder producer organisations, giving the Foundation a wealth of experience in working on collective action in the agricultural market context. However, the Foundation’s experience of providing such grants has highlighted that grantees are struggling to understand the best strategies for supporting women in their programmes. The RWCA Project is highly relevant from the Foundation’s perspective in helping its grantees and the broader development community, to understand what works best for women smallholders.

From Oxfam’s perspective, the confederation has invested significantly, both historically and presently in sustainable livelihoods programmes. Since 2009, Oxfam has been developing an initiative called ‘Women’s Economic Leadership (WEL)’ of which RWCA was a research component. Recently, WEL thinking, toolkit and guidance have come under a wider ‘umbrella’ initiative called Gendered Enterprise and Markets (GEM). The GEM Initiative will find the results from the RWCA Project highly relevant. GEM is a market systems approach to sustainable livelihoods, which examines the whole market environment in order to identify the most effective points for Oxfam to intervene, maximising positive, sustainable gains for marginalised smallholders. GEM brings together Oxfam’s experience and expertise in 3 areas, namely: improving smallholder power in agricultural markets; women’s economic leadership; and climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

The Project is also highly relevant to Oxfam’s GROW campaign, which aims to stimulate investment in a new future for agriculture, with a focus on smallholder producers. GROW is campaigning for women to have the same access to agricultural resources as men as a means of increasing yields and enhancing food security.

In terms of the global context, since inception of the Project in 2009, the global development community has begun a dialogue process to put in place a suitable development framework to replace the Millennium Development Goals when they expire in 2015 - commonly known as the Post-2015 Agenda. An intergovernmental process was launched at the Rio +20 Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012, which led to the establishment of an open working group tasked with identifying global sustainable development goals which will be agreed by the UN General Assembly. Proposals from the open working group will be heard by the General Assembly in 2013 with their recommendations likely to have a focus on sustainable livelihoods which recognise the importance of economic, social and environmental dimensions. Findings from the RWCA Project are incredibly timely and relevant to this dynamic process and will support advocates aiming to influence the Post-2015 Agenda for the benefit of women smallholders.

Economic development in Africa is another factor which reinforces the relevance of the RWCA Project. The continent has seen remarkable economic growth in recent years which continues to open up a range of new commercial opportunities. Africa’s combined economies are predicted to grow by 7 per cent over the next 2 decades- more than China.<sup>[2]</sup> Foreign investors have realised that the rates of return in the continent are greater than in any other developing region. In many parts of Africa, this has spurred a renewed focus on crafting formalised, regulatory environments to facilitate investment in the agricultural sector. In this dynamic environment providing support to market-based formal producer organisations without understanding collective action formation from a gendered perspective, is likely to neglect women’s needs and threaten a deepening of gender inequalities.

The immediate beneficiaries of this Project are those development actors engaged in agricultural development. Unlike a traditional development intervention, as a research project, the RWCA Project was not designed to deliver immediate improvements to the lives of women smallholders. The Project was an exercise in learning from women about the various contexts and circumstances in which they engaged in collective action, its forms and what benefits, if any, they derived from it. That said, feedback from key informants suggests that women smallholders clearly saw the activities of the Project, including stakeholder dialogues and focus group discussions, as relevant and beneficial to them and indeed there is some evidence that women have benefitted directly from it, albeit in small numbers.



Women smallholders, as well as male smallholders, were engaged throughout the Project helping to shape and inform the research approach, for example, through the identification of agricultural sub-sectors, taking part in answering the research questions and supporting the validation and dissemination of research findings. From key informants' perspectives, women attended stakeholder events in large numbers and felt free to express themselves during meetings. Many of the women involved at the outset of the project, remained to the end. What's more, the project has been relevant for many women as it has given them a forum to express their priorities:

“Half of our beneficiaries are women and the priorities of these women are the household, a good life, a good family life, harmonious life with enough income to buy food and have a good housing situation, send children to school and pay hospital bills and other basic needs. I think this project has contributed to that. Women can change their situation, they can change their own livelihoods situation, their income, through marketing their agricultural products.”

**Key Informant**

“their [women smallholders] needs are met in the project, which is why they are so engaged in the process. During the project I saw that at the beginning the women who were there, at the finish were there. There was no women saying that the process was not interesting for them.”

**Key Informant**

Whether the Project will be relevant to women smallholders in the future will be determined by the Project's ability to use its findings to influence the approaches and strategies of development actors that lead to tangible improvements in their lives. This could be further understood by conducting an impact assessment at a later date.

## REFERENCES

- 1 OECD/DAC Evaluation Guidelines: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluationofdevelopmentprogrammes/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>, accessed December 2012.
- 2 Africa Summit: Africa Unchained. Available: [http://www.economistconferences.co.uk/event/africa-summit-2013/6654?utm\\_source=EconomistConferences.com&utm\\_medium=Refferal&utm\\_campaign=EM0140](http://www.economistconferences.co.uk/event/africa-summit-2013/6654?utm_source=EconomistConferences.com&utm_medium=Refferal&utm_campaign=EM0140), accessed December 2012.

## KEY POINTS

- Based on available evidence, the evaluator considers the RWCA Project to be highly relevant to a wealth of development actors, including the Project's sponsor and the Oxfam confederation. The research findings have the potential to address a number of key knowledge gaps that could improve programming of women's collective action in markets initiatives in developing country contexts.
- Various development actors are engaged in agricultural development activities, including empowerment of women in this context. Until this Project little evidence existed about the most effective strategies for women's collective action with a focus on gender equitable outcomes.
- The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will use the Project's findings to support their grantees and inform their grant-making decisions.
- The findings of the Project are highly relevant to Oxfam and are increasingly so since the launch of both their GROW campaign and the GEM Initiative.
- Contextual factors, such as the on-going Post-2015 Agenda dialogue and remarkable rates of economic growth in the African continent, provide relevant opportunities for the Project to disseminate its findings.

## 3.2 Project Effectiveness

Effectiveness is an assessment of the extent to which a project, programme or campaign, brings about intended changes in specific target groups within an agreed timeframe. It attempts to address the question: did the Project bring about the changes it said it would?

In the case of the RWCA Project, effectiveness can be assessed in two main ways: firstly, by exploring the extent to which the Project was able to answer its overall research question (research findings); and secondly, whether it met its other stated objectives and outcomes as per the original grant application.

This section presents findings as follows:

1. **The extent to which the Project elucidated evidence to answer the overall research question (Section 3.2.1); and**
2. **How the Project used its research findings to influence development actor's thinking and approaches to support innovation and more effective women's collective action strategies (Section 3.2.2).**

### 3.2.1 Research Findings

The overall research question the project aimed to answer was: to what extent and under what conditions does women smallholder's engagement in market-focused collective action lead to gender equitable outcomes? In answering this question the Project asked numerous, related questions throughout the 3 phases of research using a range of qualitative and quantitative techniques (See Boxes 2 and 3).

Final research findings have not yet been published and at the time of writing were going through a process of internal validation. A summary of key findings was made available for the evaluation and is presented in Box 5 below, however it should be noted that these may be subject to alteration as the validation process proceeds.

Reviewing the draft research findings, it is clear that the Project has been effective in answering its overall research question. The project has shown that collective action in markets does have benefits for women smallholders and delivers wider economic and social benefits. The research has shown that not all women benefit equally; older, married women who are more time rich and with higher social status, tend to benefit more. The Project has found that women's collective action is helping to challenge unequal power relations between women and men, and the Project has identified a range of factors, relevant to governments and development actors, that enhance gender equitable outcomes (See the Country Case Studies on pages 18 and 19).

While it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to assess the quality and rigor of the Project's research findings, among key informants, there was a unanimous view that the Project's

research findings are robust, of high quality and are the product of rigorous research. Key informants have described how the research findings have improved their understanding of collective action in markets.

**"...in terms of getting research outputs, I think that there have been some ground-breaking new insights into how women's collective action works and who it benefits."**

**Key Informant**

**"We have much more understanding of the difference between the different sub-sectors, sometimes we talk about women in maize for instant which is very different from women in Allenblackia. There's a lot of collective action in the maize value chain but it is really focused on production and not on markets. The other extreme is the Allenblackia value chain where you see women very much participating in the market end of the value chain and the market is very organised. So there are huge differences between the different sub-sectors and that is very important to realise, and that was nicely analysed and written up in phase II."**

**Key Informant**



© Crispin Hughes/Oxfam



## BOX 5: KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

- I. Collective action in agricultural markets benefits women and delivers wider economic and social benefits.
- II. Women's collective action in agriculture is helping to change unequal relations between women and men.
- III. Governments, donors and NGO's interventions are helping collective action deliver benefits for women, where they:
  - a) Establish a policy environment that supports gender equality in agricultural groups;
  - b) Provide a package of services, including technology, finance, organisational management, market information and literacy;
  - c) Recognise a range of formal and informal groups, which are shown to best address multiple dimensions of women's empowerment (social support, production, savings, labour-sharing and marketing);
  - d) Support women to engage in collective marketing, not just production and finance;
  - e) Work also with men (husbands) and address gender dynamics in groups, including creating women-only spaces within mixed groups; and
  - f) Explicitly promote participation of most marginalised women and good governance so women's equitable benefits are secured.
- IV. Not all women are benefitting from market-focused collective action:
  - a) As compared to non-members, women benefitting tend to be older, married women with fewer household responsibilities & higher status.
  - b) Development actors tend to involve women in improved production and finance; few women are reached by market-focused collective action.
- V. 'Positive Exceptions' show that women's collective action - with innovative interventions – can reach new market niches, address mobility and time constraints, literacy and limitations imposed by husbands.



© Dave Clark/Oxfam

## Case Study 1: Honey (Ethiopia)

At first glance, the honey sector in Ethiopia seems an unlikely place in which to find women forming collective action groups, taking leadership positions, and benefiting from increased income generation. Beekeeping and honey production are largely male occupations, partly because harvesting honey from traditional hives requires climbing trees, which is not socially acceptable for women. Women's ability to engage in producing and marketing honey and bee products has also been hindered, however, by a lack of the necessary assets, such as land and equipment, and limited access to market services and functions, including finance, marketing and technical training.

Over the last decade, however, women have begun to participate in CA in the honey sector in Amhara region of Ethiopia, and to benefit from their involvement in these groups. This change has been enabled by a number of factors, driven by the growing global demand for honey and bee products. The sector has become an attractive investment opportunity, opening up a space for women and other marginalised smallholder producers to engage with market and state actors. Modern hive technology has also overcome a barrier to women's engagement in the sector, as the hives are relatively cheap and can be kept at ground level, close to homesteads. Crucially, external actors taking advantage of this enabling environment for women's collective action have specifically prioritised the participation of marginalised women in CA, supporting them to join and benefit from CA groups.

As a result of these factors, women from marginalised households in Amhara region in Ethiopia have been able to access and benefit from CA. This is in contrast to Oxfam's findings from Mali and Tanzania, which showed that, in those contexts, it was usually older, married women who were able to participate in CA activities. The WCA findings from Ethiopia are particularly exciting, as they suggest that focused interventions by government and development actors really can make a difference when it comes to reaching the more marginal sections of society.



## Case Study 2: Shea Butter (Mali)

The shea sector in Mali is fertile ground for women's collective action. Shea production, processing and marketing are almost entirely female-dominated activities, and, in the four villages studied for the WCA research, shea cultivation has always been an exclusively female sector. Furthermore, community involvement and different forms of collective action and solidarity are an age-old tradition in Koutiala cercle\* in Mali, where women have long been accustomed to working together to undertake a host of group activities, helped by recent government policies that support women's engagement in CA groups.

Since the late 1990s, modern CA structures, such as formally recognised associations or co-operatives, have emerged out of pre-existing forms of community involvement in the area. NGOs and government departments have taken advantage of international demand for a higher quality shea product to provide support to co-operatives for improvements to production and marketing techniques, as well as group capacity and sustainability. In the most successful WCA groups studied, these factors, along with good internal governance, strong leadership, and support from men and community authorities, have enabled the co-operatives to mature to a point where they can facilitate transformational change in women's lives. Indeed, the findings from Mali show that in the right conditions, the active participation of women in CA can empower individual women, thereby augmenting their decision-making power and influence within both the household and the community, causing lasting changes in gender relations.

\* A cercle is the second-level administrative division in Mali.

© Crispin Hughes/Oxfam



## Case Study 3:Vegetables (Tanzania)

Women’s collective action (WCA) has provided significant opportunities for women to increase their role in vegetable markets in Tanzania, as well as the benefits which can be derived from this sector. Women already perform much of the labour needed to grow vegetables, whether in their own households or as casual labourers. However, men own most of the fertile valley land on which vegetables are grown, and dominate the trade to Dar es Salaam and other urban centres within Tanzania and neighbouring countries. Men enjoy correspondingly greater control over incomes from vegetable marketing. Women, on the other hand, generally struggle to raise the funds to invest in land and irrigated vegetable production, and are often prevented from trading over long distances by their domestic responsibilities, and by attitudes which discourage women from sleeping away from home.

The research in Lushoto district, Tanzania, shows that involvement in collective action considerably increases economic and other benefits that women gain from vegetable production and marketing. Not only have women members’ incomes increased, but in some cases this has translated into greater control over these incomes, enabling them to invest more in the development of their households and the welfare and education of their children. For these women, there are both advantages and disadvantages of participation in different forms of CA, each with different kinds of links to markets. The findings from Lushoto make it clear that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ model of CA, and that providing support to informal, as well as formal groups, may be more effective than promoting a standard group model. It is also apparent that if Tanzanian women smallholder farmers are to benefit fully from different kinds of CA in agricultural markets and value chains, they require better co-ordination by development actors on the ground and a more coherent policy framework to support women’s participation in CA.



© Geoff Sayer/Oxfam

## 3.2.2 Effectiveness of Communication and Influencing Activities

The original Project proposal to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation included stated objectives and outcomes relating to the dissemination of research findings to influence and shape development actor’s thinking, approaches and strategies to women’s collective action (See Box 7). To assist with the analysis of these components, they have been distilled into two aspects:

1. **An assessment of the communication activities undertaken by the Project; and**
2. **Evidence of changes in thinking, approaches and/or strategies of relevant development actors.**

### BOX 6: STATED PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

#### STATED OBJECTIVES:

1. Oxfam and other development actors use rigorous evidence to adjust approaches and tools to support rural women producer’s effective collective action in key agricultural sub-sectors in sub-Saharan Africa;
2. To contribute to an understanding of how women’s participation in different forms of collective action in agricultural markets in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Mali can contribute to improvements in their incomes, control over assets and influence over decision-making at the household, community and farmer organisation level;
3. To identify effective innovations and strategies in support of effective women’s collective action in agricultural markets in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania; and
4. To develop approaches to promote the adoption of innovations and more effective strategies to support women’s collective action in agricultural markets among Oxfam Programmes, partners and wider platforms of stakeholders in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania.



## BOX 6 CONT: STATED PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

### STATED OUTCOMES:

1. Strong stakeholder engagement in the research and learning processes at country and global levels;
2. Target audiences at country and global levels access and make use of evidence and tools produced by the RWCA Project to support adoption of good practices;
3. Target audiences at country and global levels improve their understanding and adopt improved practices based on research findings from the RWCA Project;
4. Wide media/internet coverage of key RWCA Project events by at least 3 main national organisations; and
5. Wide dissemination of RWCA Project's research outputs.

### 3.2.2.1 Communication Activities

The communications component of the Project aimed to: engage stakeholders in the research process; influence Oxfam programmes; and enable debate, sharing and consolidation of knowledge among a global community of researchers and practitioners working on women's collective action.

#### Stakeholder Engagement

The Project had an explicit stakeholder engagement strategy that has worked well and has received a great deal of praise from key informants. In Phase I, stakeholder engagement, through national and regional stakeholder dialogues, helped the Project to identify relevant agricultural sub-sectors which was a valuable process given the breadth of sub-sectors available to study. Hence, stakeholders helped to shape the research and steer it on the most relevant path of investigation. Moreover, helping to raise the visibility of women smallholder farmers in agricultural markets, and to develop commitment and ownership over the outcomes.

While difficult to assess, it was suggested that women smallholders are already using the results of the Project to help them speak out:

“These women...are using the results of this research to go ahead and to speak. [The Project] was a great thing because now they know what they have to do, they are not doing it because ‘my neighbour is doing’, no! They do things and they know what is behind it in terms of added value [to them].”

**Key Informant**

#### Communication Products and Platforms

The Project developed a dedicated Wiki website as a single entry point for the global community of development researchers and practitioners to access. A wealth of project documentation is stored on the site and the Project's transparency is to be congratulated. However, the abundance of documentation could be better organised to differentiate between general Project documentation, such as minutes, etc. and research outputs. It has not been possible to access usage data for the Wiki website. Another online platform related to the RWCA Project included Oxfam's *Grow Sell Thrive* website. This site has 216 members from over twenty countries, including partner organisations, and allied INGOs. Webinars and findings were disseminated through the *Grow Sell Thrive* website as well as the more focused WCA group on the Wiki.

The Project has produced a range of country reports, Project updates, Powerpoint presentations, synthesis papers and country case studies. Some steps were taken to ‘push’ these products out to key audiences for example at global, regional and national conferences; during the National Seminars which were held in September and October 2012 and through webinars.

A series of 5 webinars were organised by the Project and were praised by several key informants. It is not clear to the evaluator how these were promoted but data from the first 3 webinars shows that approximately 45 people attended, across some 11 organisations and 10 countries. Some key informants expressed concern that stakeholders from Africa were not always able to benefit from the webinars due to technology gaps, such as low bandwidth internet.

A series of videos depicting the first round of regional and national stakeholder dialogue events were produced in a range of languages and made available online. Plans to commission further videos were dropped due to budget constraints.



## Stakeholder Dialogues

Stakeholder dialogues in countries have been praised by a large number of key informants and project documentation supports the view that they acted as effective platforms for both engaging smallholders and other stakeholders, but also helped to generate considerable enthusiasm about the project. Some project documentation directly linked this enthusiasm with an influencing effect about how programmes are designed, however the evaluator was not able to substantiate this finding.

Those key informants involved in the stakeholder dialogue events certainly had the view that the Project has helped women smallholders to speak out about their priorities and have their voices heard. The evaluator also heard that the process of bringing women together from across regions was invaluable as often trends are followed in particular villages, hence meeting women from other areas helped smallholders to exchange ideas.

**“They know now that they have power and they use this power, so these women are not naïve, you know, today.”**

**Key Informant**

## Supporting Local Organisations

To facilitate the research process in-country, particularly the stakeholder dialogues, Oxfam partnered with local organisations (referred to as co-convenors) who had existing relationships with women smallholders. This was a clever strategy that not only expedited the process of identifying key stakeholders and engaging women smallholders but it also allowed the Project to build on the credibility and trust already established by co-convening organisations. This benefit worked both ways, with key informants from co-convening organisations stating that the project had helped their organisations to enhance their profile in villages and with new community members not already known to them.

## Shifting Focus

It is clear that as the Project timeline began to slip (See [Section 3.4.1](#)), there was a shift to be more centrally focused on the research aspect of the Project. The loss of staff capacity and the decision to move the Project’s communication officer to project management duties, and the reallocation of funding away from communication activities towards research activities, is testament to this situation e.g. final round of stakeholder dialogues were dropped. Influencing activities are dependent on good quality research and reasonable decisions were taken to safeguard the quality of the research outputs.

It is regretful that the Project’s engaging and creative communications strategy was never fully put into play, however communication activities continued at the national level despite a shift in focus at the central Project level. For example, in Mali the team worked on a communication plan which facilitated the identification of key targets in-country. The project team were able to document and share video footage of the Project, inform a larger group of targets by compiling mailing lists, physically share newsletters translated into local languages among village based producers’ organisation and reach out to journalists covering major events.

**“We had our communications co-ordinator ending up doing a lot of the co-ordination on the research, so there was a period of time when we were not promoting participation on the online community of practice and it went pretty flat for a while.”**

**Key Informant**

**“My sense is that the change in strategy [to central communications] to deal with the shortage of funds, has not been a major constraint to [reaching] our targeted audience with the communication component.”**

**Key Informant**

## 3.2.2.2 Evidence of Influencing Development Actors and Others

Among the reasons for selecting the 3 focal countries was the fact that Oxfam had active agricultural development programmes working in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania. It is a stated objective of the Project to both gain a better understanding of collective action in these contexts as well as to influence Oxfam programmes, and other development actors, to modify their approaches and strategies in light of the Project’s findings. This section will explore the extent to which there is evidence of this effect.

Many key informants have praised the quality of the research outputs, with some clear examples of how the Project’s research findings are influencing development actor’s thinking. At present there are few examples of how the project has influenced development actors’ approaches to women’s collective action.

There are some important caveats to this statement, the first of which is in relation to the Project timeline and evaluation timeline. The evaluation was commissioned to run close to the end of the Project but before the publication of the Project's final results. Given that the final results have not been approved or widely disseminated it is clearly premature to expect to find examples of how the findings have influenced development actor's approaches to collective action. That said, this has been a 3 year project with results emerging throughout its lifetime, so it is reasonable to expect to find some evidence of influencing effects, particularly as this is a stated objective of the Project.

While some examples do exist (See below) it has been suggested by key informants that while they are sure the Project has catalysed change, that such change was never systematically recorded as the Project was not designed to capture this. Such comments highlight that some key informants were unaware of the Project's monitoring, evaluation and learning framework.

A final caveat, referred to in [Section 2.6](#), are constraints of budget and hence time, for the evaluation process. This 3 year, multi-country, complex research Project has been evaluated in just 21 days and with a budget of 0.7 per cent of that of the Project. This consequently means that levels of precision are lower than ideal, with low sample sizes, little time to review large quantities of project documentation and little time to validate findings.

There is some evidence of the Project's findings influencing development actors in relation to enhancing their knowledge, understanding and thinking of women's collective action. Various stakeholders spoke of how the Project has helped them to gain an in-depth insight on what works and what is effective. This is captured well by the following key informants:

“I think we have a much better understanding of the diversity of the ways women are involved at the grassroots, household and community levels. Very often we make very generalised statements about women in agriculture, the benefit of collective action for women to become stronger, together they are stronger than being individuals. We really didn't understand the dynamics of women's involvement in groups, we didn't understand how women related to each other, we didn't understand how the women's participation in groups varies over time. Very often we assess a situation on one particular point of time and we assume that is the correct representation of the women in groups but through the phase

III research, where we really dug deeper, we did some very in-depth case studies, we found that things change over time. There is a lot of positive development, negative development, power dynamics, interaction between men and women change over time, sometimes women are able to overcome some of the challenges, sometimes they are not. And in different groups it takes different courses. So knowing why it takes different courses I think that is of value, that is the ground-breaking insight we learnt from this research.”

**Key Informant**

“I think we have all learnt a lot, from various levels, about what kinds of collective action are going on in different countries, in the later stages [of the research] we've learned much more about the specific and quantifiable benefits of Women's Collective Action.

**Key Informant**



© Geoff Sayer/Oxfam



The Project supported the recognition by government authorities, producer unions and development actors that women smallholders and collective action in agricultural markets exist. The stakeholder dialogues and communications strategies in years one and two had a significant impact on the visibility and recognition of women as smallholders, and recognition of the extent of women's collective action groups. This must be understood as a critical prerequisite for development actors and

governments, among others, if they are to be interested in and make use of the Project's research findings.

Examples of how this deeper understanding of women's collective action has translated into changes in programming were less obvious with key informants often vague on detail. As noted above however, given that the Project's results are still to be published, this is not an unreasonable finding.

## INFLUENCING DEVELOPMENT ACTORS: EXAMPLES FROM KEY INFORMANTS

- Oxfam's programmes in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania have been improved in light of the research findings. For example in Tanzania, phase I of the Project showed that the vegetable sub-sector in the Tanga Region was a relatively conducive women domain for smallholder farmers, which helped to make a case for expanding Oxfam's value chain work in that region of Tanzania. Phases 2 and 3 helped Oxfam's Tanzania programme to understand the challenges that women faced in accessing markets, which were used in their strategies to link farmers to different types of markets. For instance, mobility challenges of women beyond their village stimulated partnership with Vodafone to develop mobile phone-based vegetable auctioning platforms, which is now in a pilot phase. The Tanzania programme also reviewed the role of men in mixed groups which were able to leverage their influence better to strengthen the position of women in mixed groups. Most groups in Tanzania are mixed;
- There is some evidence that smallholder partners engaged in the Project have modified how they deal with producer organisations, for example in relation to sub-sector selection for co-operatives in Mali. The research also confirmed that the Saving and Internal Lending Communities (SILCS) facilitated by Oxfam and partners in Tanzania, have resulted in the empowerment of women (financial skills, confidence and decision-making). Therefore, micro-finance targeted towards women will continue to play an important role in Oxfam's Tanzania programme;
- Oxfam's new livelihood strategy in Mali has been clearly formulated to include the methodology used by the Project in the selection of agricultural sub-sectors. Under the Oxfam confederation's single management structure, Oxfam GB is the livelihoods lead, creating potential to influence livelihood programmes of other Oxfam affiliates in Mali;
- The Oxfam Research Manager was seconded to Oxfam's GROW Campaign helping to translate the Project's findings on collective action into the GROW Campaign's policy development and policy debate processes. Similar cross-fertilisation of the research findings occurred within Oxfam's Women's Economic Leadership and Gender Enterprises Teams; and
- Oxfam and partners held a participatory learning process from May – July 2012 focused on the issues of women's agency in households and communities within 6 agricultural markets programmes. This choice of learning topic was influenced by the RWCA findings (Phase II) that in all three countries women were facing barriers of mobility, time and 'husbands' restrictions' in order to engage in markets, and that these issues were not being addressed by local CA groups.

**Learning from the Project extended to various stakeholders who attended the stakeholder dialogue events, including women smallholders, CBOs, local decision-makers and Government officials. Some additional examples of shaping knowledge, attitudes and practices include:**

- Women smallholders gaining insight into what worked best for them. A small number of key informants working directly with smallholders suggested that the Project had influenced their practice to the extent that they now prioritise engaging in higher value production. For example, in Tanzania an observed increase in the number of smallholders engaging in local chicken marketing in nearby towns; and in the rice sub-sector where smallholders are now packaging rice in smaller 2kg bags and selling directly in smaller towns at higher prices, rather than selling larger 100 kg bags to middle men who transport these to larger towns. Moreover, more women are now observed to be selling rice than before with some evidence that they have improved their incomes as a result. It has not been possible however to validate these findings from other sources.



“...nowadays we even see the women selling the rice which is nice that they get the money and their lives are changing. We even see that in the villages women have been coming up and even telling us to walk around this house [that it] is because of [selling] rice. ‘I’ve got so many bags and I could even send my children to school.’ They have really been telling us such things... I think those changes have been very beneficial to the women.”

### Key Stakeholder

- At an event where senior government staff attended, a key informant described how they had come with predefined views on women’s priorities but that by the end of the event, they had reflected about their new understanding of the importance of women’s smallholder organisations in terms of outcomes for women. There is no evidence as yet of changes at country government level, linked to the Project.

### A key informant from Mali was also able to identify some unexpected benefits, including:

- Increased partnership working. For example, the National Federation of Rural Women intends to become a partner of Oxfam in Mali, which was not the case before the Project. The key informant believes this is because the Project had been well received and even called for the Project’s research findings to be shared at the forthcoming International Day of Rural women; and
- Researchers in Mali have benefitted through linkages with Northern researchers and research institutes, helping to introduce them to, or reinforce, a variety of research methodologies.

While the project is viewed to have been very successful in terms of its research outputs, influencing effects based on communication activities are still very nascent. For many key informants, this was a reasonable trade-off to safeguard the quality of the research outputs. What is less clear however is who will be driving the dissemination of the research findings and advocating for change among development actors now that the Project has ended. A decision within Oxfam to disband the Women’s Livelihoods Team – originally set up with funding support from this Project - is of concern (See Section 3.3). No plans have yet been seen by the evaluator that articulate how the research outputs will be disseminated and this is of concern to a large number of key informants.



© Tom Pietrasik/Oxfam



## KEY POINTS:

- Although the research findings have not yet been agreed or disseminated, it is clear that a wealth of new information has been amassed on women's collective action in markets and that the Project has gone a considerable way towards answering its original research question.
- The findings of the research have helped to generate a new body of knowledge on women's collective action. More is now known about the various forms of WCA, the agricultural sub-sectors in which it does and does not occur; the socio-economic profile of those women who benefit and those who do not; its impact on women's income, social status and empowerment; and a range of approaches and strategies that governments and development actors can take to optimise gender equitable outcomes for women engaged in collective action in markets.
- Key informants are of the view that the Project has produced high quality, rigorous research outputs that will help in the dissemination of the findings and facilitate uptake by development actors. In relation to the research outputs therefore, the Project scores highly for effectiveness.
- The quality of the Project's communications plans and activities was praised, with a large number of communication products being produced during the Project's lifetime.
- Timeline and budgetary issues necessitated a reassignment of the Project's communication officer which hindered the ability of the Project to remain focused on its communication and influencing components. However, evidence from Mali suggests that this did not necessarily hinder country-level communication activities.
- There is evidence that the Project has increased stakeholder's understanding of women's collective action in markets. Some evidence exists to show that the research findings have begun to influence Oxfam's approaches and strategies in relation to WCA but change in this dimension of the Project are nascent. Further evidence is required before it can be conclusively stated that this has been an effective component of the Project.
- Although monitoring, evaluation and learning systems were in place, few key informants appear to have known about them. This may have led to a failure in capturing evidence in relation to stated influencing objectives and outcomes.

### 3.3 Key Decisions Affecting the Project

In a project of this scale, key decisions and adaptations are regularly taken as routine. Some decisions however have the potential to significantly impact upon a project and 2 key decisions of this type are discussed here: the decision to terminate the contract with the Project's initial research partner; and the decision to disband Oxfam's Women's Livelihoods Team.

#### Terminating the Contract with the Project's Initial Research Partner

In 2009, Oxfam began a process of exploration to bring on board a suitable research partner to be part of their grant submission to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. That grant submission was successful and the RWCA Project was

launched in December 2009. The initial research partner, in the first months of the project, was required to produce a comprehensive literature review and research methodology to inform the Project's design and focus, and source and secure research expertise to contribute towards the Project.

The literature review and proposed methodology were peer reviewed at the first IAG meeting in June 2010 with a raft of revisions and suggestions for improvements made. In the months following the IAG, Oxfam reported that the initial research partner did not deliver on the improvements required by peer reviewers, despite considerable investment on their part to clarify what was needed. This led to Oxfam taking the difficult decision to terminate its contract with the initial research partner formally on October 2010, following a period of careful deliberation with senior managers.

The purpose here is to establish the impact of this decision by Oxfam on the Project and to assess the quality of that decision. It should be noted that the evaluator did not interview anyone from the initial research partner.

In the short-term, Oxfam brought the Project's research management in-house while it explored with partners, including the BMGF, a number of scenarios for managing the Project's research component. During the Project's lifetime, Oxfam did attempt to bring on board a new research partner (in project years 2 and 3), but due to issues mainly of timing and capacity for the proposed research partner, this was not realised. Ultimately therefore, the de facto decision was for Oxfam to absorb the research management responsibilities of the Project.

Although not the original intention, in light of events, it was felt that managing the research in-house would facilitate strong links with Oxfam programmes taking part in the research. Country research teams were to be managed by Oxfam country programmes with research advisory support from two consultant researchers. The initial research partner had already recruited researchers from the 3 focal countries, in some instances these researchers were retained for phase I, while in others, new researchers had to be found e.g. in Tanzania.

The evaluator notes that these two interconnected decisions had the following consequences on the Project:

### Project Timeline

The decision cost the Project around 5 months initially but the effect cascaded across the Project, leading to further time delays throughout the lifetime of the Project. The project ended 10 months behind schedule (Discussed further in [Section 3.3.1](#)).

### Pressure to Deliver

The loss of time added a significant and palpable level of pressure on everyone involved in delivering the Project, from staff within Oxfam House and Oxfam programme staff, to independent consultants. It is acknowledged that projects of this complexity are often associated with a level of pressure to deliver on time, but from the diversity and number of sources who commented upon this, it is clear that timelines were very tight and all felt pressure to deliver.

### Project Timeline

Consultants had to be sourced and contracted to increase research management capacity at additional cost to the Project. By the end of the Project it was overspent by 33 per cent (Discussed further in [Section 3.3.3](#)). In an environment of high pressure, where the Project timeline is slipping, sub-optimal hiring decisions were made that caused further time delays and expense e.g. hiring a research advisor who could not travel, which then necessitated the hiring of additional consultants.

### Shift in Focus

As Oxfam was now responsible for research management as well as overall project management, it perhaps facilitated a shift in focus away from communication and influencing activities

towards the research process, particularly as the Project moved into phases II and III. The research dominated. A number of key informants commented on this and while they understood the reasons for prioritising the research, it did have an impact on the effectiveness of the Project. While there is no doubt that Oxfam staff have high calibre research skills and are fully competent to lead research processes, it does not appear that Oxfam's decision to incorporate the research management of the Project – following extensive consultation - led to required structural changes to facilitate this increased responsibility e.g. appointing a full-time research manager with no other Oxfam commitments. The Project's Research Manager had other organisational commitments and part way through the Project was seconded to the GROW campaign reducing her available time to the Project by 70 per cent.

It is not possible for the evaluator to judge whether or not it was the right decision to terminate the contract with the initial research partner. From speaking with Oxfam staff and members of the IAG, they certainly believe that the right decision was made in ending that relationship. What is clear is that the decision to terminate the contract with the initial research partner, an inability to secure a new research partner despite attempts resulting in Oxfam bringing the research management in-house, had a number of serious consequences in terms of the project timeline and budget which increased pressure on everyone to deliver and led to some activities being dropped.

The decision to move the research management to Oxfam, while sound in light of their attempts to secure a new research partner, should have been accompanied by structural changes within the organisation that recognised this substantial additional responsibility. In the end, decisions were taken, or perhaps not taken, by Oxfam's senior management that may have hindered the Project team's ability to manage the research component and manage the Project, exacerbating all of the problems identified above.

### Disbanding the Women's Livelihoods Team

Oxfam's decision to disband the Women's Livelihood Team raises a number of questions about how the Project's research findings are to be disseminated. The people within Oxfam who have the most knowledge of the findings, and commitment to see them affect change, either won't have the capacity because their job profiles will change, or because they will be made redundant. Given that the Project still has some distance to travel in terms of using the research findings to influence, it would be interesting to know what plans Oxfam has made to its donor and Project partners. Many key informants, of whom several were external to Oxfam, are vague about what happens next and are concerned that momentum will be lost if effective plans are not articulated.



## KEY POINTS:

- The decision to terminate the contract with the Project’s initial research partner represents the single biggest factor affecting the Project’s timeline and budget. Attempts failed to contract a new research partner resulting in Oxfam bringing the research management of the Project in-house. It appears that this decision was not accompanied by a commitment to make the necessary structural changes to the Project team that were required to accommodate the organisation’s increased research management responsibilities. The underestimation of these additional responsibilities placed a tremendous amount of pressure on the Project team that pervaded the entire Project.
- Oxfam’s decision to disband the Women’s Livelihoods team potentially threatens expedient and effective dissemination of the Project’s research findings and loss of momentum the Project has built up in readiness to influence development actors. Little is known about how Oxfam intends to ensure the influencing component of the Project is carried out, with stakeholders eager to learn about ‘next steps’.

## 3.4 Project Efficiency

The efficiency of a project is assessed by judging its ability to transform inputs, such as finance and staff capacity, into outputs. Key to this assessment is whether planned activities were delivered, on time and on budget. A central component of this assessment must therefore include judgements about the overall management of the Project, including of the research. The Project’s timeline is shown in Figure 1 below for reference purposes.

Conducting quality and rigorous research in 3 separate SSA countries is an incredibly complex undertaking. While this evaluation aims to highlight aspects of the Project’s efficiency it aims to do so with sensitivity and in recognition of the complexity of the task at hand and the myriad factors at play, that can both help and hinder the success of complex projects of this kind.

Figure 1: Project Timeline



The Project faced a number of internal and external challenges that significantly affected the Project's ability to deliver some of its planned activities; its timeline; and its budget. The following internal factors have been identified by the evaluator which directly hindered the Project's efficiency:

### Research Management Factors

- The decision to terminate the external research management contract with the initial research partner (discussed in [Section 3.3](#)) and unsuccessful attempts to contract a new research partner, ultimately led Oxfam to bring the Project's research management in-house. While there is no doubt that Project team members had the skills, experiences and talents to manage the research, the evaluator is unconvinced that Oxfam, as an organisation, provided an optimal environment for the research and project management team, perhaps due to failings in recognising the demanding nature of managing both the research dimension in combination with overall management of the project.
- Without a research partner, Oxfam had to recruit research consultants to increase capacity. There were a number of recruitment challenges in trying to source experienced consultants in short timeframes. This perhaps led to some sub-optimal appointments on occasion, causing delays and additional expense, particularly in phases II and III.

### Personnel Factors

- Several Oxfam Project team staff required time off work due to periods of extended illness or for personal issues during the lifetime of the Project: terminal illness and bereavement of a parent, chronic illness (2 months), sick leave (1 month), extended hospitalisation of a child, and maternity leave;
- The decision to place the Research Manager on secondment with Oxfam's GROW Campaign reduced the amount of time she could give to the Project by 70 per cent. It is recognised that the Research Manager worked considerable amounts of unpaid overtime to try and maintain her input to the Project but officially her time commitment was just 30 per cent - which is insufficient for a project of this size and complexity. This subsequently had significant repercussions for other team members' workloads that had to help with the strain of managing a large project with inadequate human resourcing – again leading to significant amounts of unpaid overtime. Moreover, this affected the remits of Project team staff who had to take on roles that were not their area of specialism e.g. communication specialist taking on a research management role;
- Key informants posited that Oxfam's internal HR systems, while good at responding to the needs of individuals, failed to recognise, and hence address the gaps in capacity left by absent team members; and

- Change in managers and two changes of team structure during the project.

### External Factors

- A military coup in Mali led to delays in progressing the research.

## 3.4.1 Project Timeline

The Project began in December 2009 and was originally designed to be delivered in 2 phases over a 24 month period and conclude by November 2011. This was later revised to be a 36 month project delivered in 3 phases following early findings from Phase I and feedback for the IAG during their first meeting in June 2010. This alteration to the Project was agreed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in May 2011.

The decision to terminate the contract with the initial research partner caused a delay of at least 5 months to the Project in its first year. Subsequently, Oxfam wrote to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in January 2012 to request an 8 month extension to the Project, moving the Project end date to July 2012. This was agreed. Oxfam wrote again to the Foundation in March 2012 requesting a further, no cost extension to the Project, moving the Project end date to December 2012. This resulted in the Project ending approximately 10 months after schedule.

Deciding to terminate the initial research partner's contract has been identified as the single biggest factor affecting the Project timeline with subsequent delays arising from this decision, for example, in identifying and recruiting suitably qualified and experienced consultants to conduct and manage the research process in-country.

## 3.4.2 Delivering Results

The original project proposal was ambitious, perhaps overly so. Committing to conduct rigorous research across 3 countries is ambitious enough in its own right, before considering the Project's parallel communication and influencing activities. While it is recognised that the Project has been effective in producing research outputs of a quality that will optimise their dissemination and uptake, available evidence suggests that the Project has fallen short in delivering its planned influencing outcomes.

[Section 3.2.2.1](#) describes how a number of communication activities had to be scaled back, with some not being delivered as planned, although it is recognised that evidence from Mali indicates communication activities continued at country level. Nonetheless, this has had some impact on the Project's ability to influence development actor's programming. Similarly as the budget began to rise, plans had to change in terms of the

research design. For example, it was originally intended for phase III to include surveys of all 6 agricultural sub-sectors per country but this had to be scaled back to 1 per country. It was recognised by the IAG at their meeting in July 2010 that conducting surveys of 6 agricultural sub-sectors per country was not feasible yet exploratory research was done across these 6 sub-sectors per country irrespective.

### 3.4.3 Project Budget

The original project budget was \$1,039,784 but resource gaps began to appear early in the Project as a consequence of the internal and external factors discussed above. Oxfam wrote to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation one year into the Project to highlight to them a budget shortfall and request an additional \$285,407.

#### The shortfall included:

- **around \$119,000 of Project funds transferred to the initial research partner for which desired outcomes were not delivered in terms of quality and the resultant costs of re-commissioning this work through consultants;**
- **increased travel costs;**
- **additional consultant costs; and**
- **additional contractor costs.**

Financial information is not available for Project year 2 but there appears to have been an under-spend. The budget for year 3 of \$326,203 increased by 95 per cent to \$635,906 – the financial shortfall was met by reallocating the budget underspend from year 2 and from a financial contribution from Oxfam of \$54,701. The final budget for the Project therefore was approximately \$1,379,892, an overspend of \$340,108 (33 per cent).

### 3.4.4 Project and Research Management

The project's management and research management has been praised. In addition a number of critiques were raised which were felt by key informants to have affected the Project's efficiency.

As delays became apparent, Project management was proactive, identifying mitigation plans as necessary, updating Project plans and communicating to Project stakeholders the effects of delays to the Project. There was some criticism of Oxfam's systems in releasing funds to consultants on time but these were small points made by only a few key informants.

Given the breadth of challenges the Project faced, some key informants felt that short-term solutions were often found to challenges that had an immediate but limited effect; which

perhaps needed addressing repeatedly. Hiring of consultants is a good example of this, where under pressure to find researchers; rushed decisions were perhaps made without sufficient checks around expectations and clarity of roles, leading to additional transaction costs and loss of time. Moreover, Oxfam doesn't naturally have networks of research expertise in the focal countries that it could draw upon, unlike a research institute, or have access to peer reviewers for quality control, which Oxfam had to procure.

Giving greater autonomy to the focal countries was felt by a number of key informants to be a more efficient approach. Several key informants referred to a top-down, directive style of research management. A commitment to research rigour perhaps led to a top-down approach, mindful of wanting a high level of standardisation among and across research teams. However helping people to work together as teams is also a recognised way of achieving this end.

During the validation of this report, the evaluator notes comments from a reviewer that changes made to ways of working in year 3 were appreciated by country leads - according to 360° performance review documents. It has been pointed out that country leads were involved in the recruitment of country level researchers in phase III. However, these changes were not mentioned by key informants during the evaluation.

A related point was a decision to have qualitative and quantitative research carried out by separate teams in phase III. While it is understood that researchers often have a preference for qualitative or quantitative research, the Project was intended to be a mixed methods approach. A number of key informants highlighted that the qualitative and quantitative teams had little, if any communication between them while in-country, working independently to produce their results. Some felt this to be a fairly arbitrary and artificial separation of two teams that should have been working in synchrony with each other. For example, the final project team meeting in Arusha, Tanzania was the first time that the global teams had come together to present their results.

Having two distinct teams requires more human capital and more co-ordination. Key informants felt that co-ordination between research teams could have been better. Indeed key informants referred to there being too many people involved on this Project which made it difficult at times to get things moving in the right direction.

One of the main effects of terminating the initial research partner's contract and bringing the research management in-house was on the Project timeline. A number of key informants spoke of the unrealistic and pressured timelines and its impact on efficiency. For example, on occasion because of time pressures the quality of research was often not adequate and had to be redone e.g. country reports for phase III.



In summary, while acknowledging the complexity of the Project and the various factors that have impacted upon it, the Project overall was inefficient in some key areas. The Project timeline ran over by 10 months, the Project budget was 33 per cent overspent, combined with various critiques of project and research management decisions that were sub-optimal. It is easy to point out mistakes with the luxury of hindsight, the purpose of documenting them here is to facilitate learning to enhance the efficiency of future Projects.

## KEY POINTS

- The project faced a number of internal and external challenges that impacted upon its overall efficiency. These factors ultimately resulted in the Project being 33 per cent over budget (\$340,108) and 10 months behind schedule.
- As a consequence of these challenges, the research component of the Project dominated, resulting in the project falling short in terms of delivering stated influencing outcomes.
- The project management and research management were praised. Some critiques were noted of project management and research management actions that were felt to have affected the Project's efficiency.
- While acknowledging the complexity of the Project and the various challenges it faced during its lifetime, the Project overall was inefficient in key areas, including in regard to budget, timeframe and stated objectives and outcomes.

## 3.5 Identified Areas of Good Practice

A number of areas of good practice from this Project have been identified, including:

### Stakeholder Engagement

The Project had an explicit stakeholder engagement plan that has been widely praised by key informants. This plan saw engagement at the global level through the IAG, the Project Wiki, the *Grow Sell Thrive* website, Webinars and Presentations; and at the regional and national levels in SSA through stakeholder dialogues, seminars, conferences and events.

### International Advisory Group

The leadership shown by the IAG was singled out as being incredibly valuable. Key informants observed real ownership by the group, indeed members of the IAG felt that it was a genuine forum in which they could shape and inform the research design and process. The IAG was well regarded with many key informants commenting upon the high calibre of expertise represented within its membership.

### Communication Activities

There was considerable praise for the communications plans developed by the Project with the Project Wiki and webinars being singled out. Key informants felt that the webinars were well structured, informative and useful and that the Wiki was a useful repository for Project documentation.

### National Researchers

Making use of national researchers was seen as good practice, not only in terms of facilitating cultural and linguistic parity but, given their connections to national research institutes, it was an important relationship in helping to disseminate research findings at a national level.

### Meeting Face-to-Face

Key informants spoke of the benefits of meeting face-to-face and felt this helped to strengthen relationships and raise the quality of the research effort. Examples included the IAG meetings which met in Oxford and the project team meetings which met in each of the focal countries over the Project life cycle. Participant evaluations of IAG meetings consistently said 'high quality, well prepared and well planned.'



## Commitment and Leadership

Several key informants were impressed by the level of commitment and leadership shown by the Oxfam research management and project management team who valued the expertise they brought to the research effort. Despite a number of challenges faced by the Project, the team's ability to overcome them, through reflection and learning, helped to keep the Project moving forward. This was acknowledged and praised. Combined with the engaging and interesting nature of the research topic, many key informants felt compelled to comment on how much they had enjoyed being a part of the Project.

## Relationship with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Key informants were impressed with the level of engagement by the Foundation's grant officer, her openness and flexibility were regarded as helping the Project to overcome its challenges and move forward.

## 3.6 Lessons Learnt

This final section highlights some important lessons learnt from the project.

### Developing Partnerships

When considering new partnerships on such a complex project, it is ideal to allow sufficient time to explore areas of convergence and divergence between institutions and to articulate clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Dialogue should happen on a number of levels, to facilitate this process including with senior managers, at a technical and policy level and between researchers.

### Strong Intellectual Leadership

Be explicit when hiring and managing research advisor of the need for clear methodological and intellectual guidance. This should include a commitment to hands-on management and accompaniment of research teams in-country. This will facilitate the identification of any gaps in capacity and refinement of methodologies as they are implemented.

### International Advisory Group

While the IAG has been praised for ensuring the relevance and quality of the research, their considerable expertise would have been useful at an earlier stage of the Project. The IAG was first convened 6 months into the Project and with hindsight, engaging them much sooner to help clarify the research framework could have helped to avoid the revisions that were required to the project in 2010.

## Prioritising Key Audiences

The original Project proposal aimed to target a diverse audience which was recognised by the IAG as too diverse. This helped to focus on those targets where the research findings could have more influence and included principally, direct targets within Oxfam's sphere of influence.

## Country Level Ownership

The project was criticised for being unnecessarily top-down and directive, more emphasis on building country ownership for future research projects has been recommended by key informants. Following learning from phase I it was decided to optimise the involvement of country programmes, and better integrate the research and communications components, by reallocating resources towards country level, identifying additional knowledge and skills where needed. It is not clear if these measures had the intended effect, although feedback from a reviewer of this report based on performance reports with country staff, suggest they were.

## Integrate Monitoring Systems for Broader Objectives and Outcomes

The dominance of the research component of the Project took focus away from monitoring for other important stated objectives and outcomes of the Project. Although a system for monitoring, evaluation and learning was in place, few key informants acknowledged it with some unaware that a system existed.





**OXFAM**

© Tom Pietrasik/Oxfam

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

**The Researching Women's Collective Action Project has illuminated a research domain that has hitherto suffered from a dearth of rigorous evidence. The findings of the research have helped to generate a new body of knowledge on women's collective action in markets. More is now known about the various forms of WCA, the agricultural sub-sectors in which it does and does not occur; women's motivations for engaging in collective action; the socio-economic profile of those women who benefit and those who do not; its impact on women's income, social status and empowerment; and a range of approaches and strategies that governments and development actors can take to optimise economic and empowerment benefits for women engaged in collective action in markets.**

The findings of the Project are considered to be of high relevance to women smallholders; donors; and development actors engaged in agricultural development with a focus on sustainable livelihoods and gender equitable outcomes. Moreover, remarkable economic growth across the African continent has opened up the potential for new commercial opportunities and in this context the research findings are invaluable in promoting a gendered approach to agricultural development to prevent neglecting women's needs in this context and risking a deepening of gender inequalities. The on-going dialogue which will pave the way for the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Framework is also an important and relevant arena for this Project's findings.

The project is widely recognised as having produced rigorous and high quality research outputs. Timeline and budgetary constraints necessitated a reorientation of the Project's priorities to safeguard the quality and rigor of the research but this was at the expense of stated influencing objectives and outcomes. In

terms of effectiveness, therefore, the Project has fallen short of its original ambition.

The decision to terminate the research management contract with the initial research partner and bring this element of the project within Oxfam's purview had significant effects on the Project's efficiency which played out over the lifetime of the Project. The Project ended 10 months late and \$340,108 (33 per cent) over budget. This effect was compounded by internal Oxfam failings to recognise the enormity of the research management responsibility, in addition to its already sizeable commitment. The increased research management responsibility did not translate into the required structural changes within the Project team to bolster capacity. This created an environment of increased workload and pressure which pervaded the entire Project, and several staff were moved into job roles that took them away from their areas of expertise.

This was an ambitious project, and in the views of some key informants, perhaps overly ambitious. This should not however detract from clear successes, including producing quality research outputs and some early signs of influence over Oxfam's thinking and approaches to programming women's collective action in markets. Even so, Oxfam's decision to disband the Women's Livelihoods Team, which comprised the key staff members who have spearheaded and championed this research, has generated concern that the momentum built up by the Project to influence will be lost. Stakeholders are keen to learn about next steps and there remains a palpable level of enthusiasm to see the Project's findings translated into improved programming and decision-making at country level. It remains to be seen however what plans are to be drawn up to make this vision of the Project a reality.



## ANNEX I: KEY INFORMANTS

	NAME	AFFILIATION	ROLE
1	Andrea Rodericks	Care	IAG Member
2	Assa Souko	Right to Play	Co-convenor
3	Carine Pionetti	Independent	Research Advisor
4	Claudia Canepa	Oxfam (on maternity leave)	Project Team
5	Eustard Rwegoshora	LBTIC	Beneficiary
6	Haven Ley	BMGF	Donor
7	Henri Leturque	Independent	Research Advisor
8.	Martin Walsh	Oxfam	Research Advisor Staff
9.	Mary Liwa	(TAWLAE)	Co-convenor
10.	Rahel Bekele	Oxfam	Country Lead
11.	Ralph Roothaert	Oxfam	Country Lead
12.	Renata Serra	IndependentQ	Research Advisor
13.	Sally Baden	Oxfam	Project Team
14.	Sally Smith	Independent	IAG Member
15.	Thalia Kidder	Oxfam	Project Team



## ANNEX II: QUESTION GUIDE FOR KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

- Question 1:** Briefly describe for me how the project has engaged with stakeholders.  
a) What, if anything, has worked well?  
b) What, if anything, could be improved upon?
- Question 2:** Thinking about what the project hopes to achieve, what, if anything has changed as a result of the project's activities?
- Question 3:** Again, thinking about what the project hopes to achieve, what, if anything has not changed despite the project's activities?
- Question 4:** What factors, if any, do you think have helped the project to be successful?
- Question 5:** What factors, if any, do you think have hindered the project's success?
- Question 6:** What do you think, if anything, is particularly innovative about the project?
- Question 7:** What evidence is there, if any, that learning from the project has been incorporated into other organisations' policies and/or practices?
- Question 8:** To what extent does the project aim to address beneficiaries' priorities?
- Question 9:** Thinking of the project's range of activities and ways of working, what are your views on their likelihood of delivering the results the project hopes to achieve?
- Question 10:** What comments do you have, if any, on how the project uses its inputs to deliver its intended results?
- Question 11:** What activities in the project plan, if any, has the project not delivered?
- Question 12:** How might the project inputs have been used differently to deliver its intended results?
- Question 13:** Thinking over the lifetime of the project, what turning points, if any, has the project faced? What was the outcome?
- Question 14:** Again, thinking over the lifetime of the project, what stands out to you, if anything, as being a key decision that may have affected the project? What was the outcome?
- Question 15:** What lessons, if any, have been learnt as a result of this project?

Achieving great things together!



OXFAM



Tel +44 (0)1273 656 026  
info@pamoja.uk.com  
www.pamoja.uk.com

Pamoja Consulting Ltd  
Pamoja House  
1 Robertson Road  
Brighton  
BN1 5NL  
United Kingdom

## About Pamoja

Our mission is to support value-led organisations that strive to improve people's lives, particularly those from the poorest communities, those who are marginalised and in places where inequalities are starkest. We work in partnership to improve social impact. We achieve this by providing expert consultancy and communications services.

Pamoja is a Swahili word that means 'together', a concept that is at the very heart of our purpose. Pamoja is committed to working in partnership with organisations, people and communities towards better quality of life for all. We believe that great things can happen when people work together.



RESEARCHING WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE  
ACTION PROJECT

Evaluation Report