

Friendly Outsider or Critical Insider?

An Action Research Account of Oxfam's
Private Sector Engagement

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Friendly Outsider or Critical Insider?
An Action Research Account of Oxfam's Private Sector
Engagement

Vriendelijk in of kritisch uit?
Verslag van een actie-onderzoek in Oxfam's private sector programma
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

¿Infiltrado amigable o aliado crítico?
Relato de una investigación-acción sobre la colaboración entre Oxfam y el sector
privado
(con sinopsis en español)

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Utrecht op gezag van
de
rector magnificus, prof.dr. G.J. van der Zwaan, ingevolge het besluit van het
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door

Luz de Lourdes Pesqueira Fernández
geboren op 5 mei 1981 te Mexico Stad, Mexico

Promotoren:

Prof.dr. P. Glasbergen

Prof.dr. P. Leroy

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Preface and Acknowledgements

When I began this research project I did not know the many turns it would take. Above all, this journey has been one of discovery. Discovery about how and why NGOs engage with the private sector, and about the strengths and limitations of action research as an approach to inquiry.

The title of this dissertation makes reference to both of these aspects. The question of being a “critical insider or friendly outsider” applies to NGOs like Oxfam who engage with the private sector from the position of both allies and adversaries, and it also applies to researchers working with organizations or groups of people to understand and improve their practice. In this sense, both Oxfam and I have had to deal with the issue of positionality. That is, where to position ourselves with respect to the private sector or the object of inquiry, respectively, and how to deal with the implications brought by acting either as a critical insider or a friendly outsider.

In the completion of this research project, three people have also played the role of critical insiders: Pieter Glasbergen, Pieter Leroy, and Johan Verburg. I am indebted for their continued support and inspiration, without which this project would not have been possible. My supervisors – better known as the Pieters – have managed to share their passion for scientific research through their sharp analyses and high demands. I particularly appreciate them teaching me understand social phenomena in more creative and abstract ways, while always allowing me the freedom to work in my own style and at my own pace.

This project could have not been realized without the involvement of many people at Oxfam Novib. In particular, I would like to thank all the members of the Private Sector Program for their openness and trust, and for sharing the information and insights that made up this research. I am especially grateful for the genuine involvement of Johan Verburg, my mentor at Oxfam Novib. I appreciate all the hours he dedicated to sharing his clever understanding of the multiple roles that NGOs play in society and to encouraging me to make more nuanced interpretations of reality.

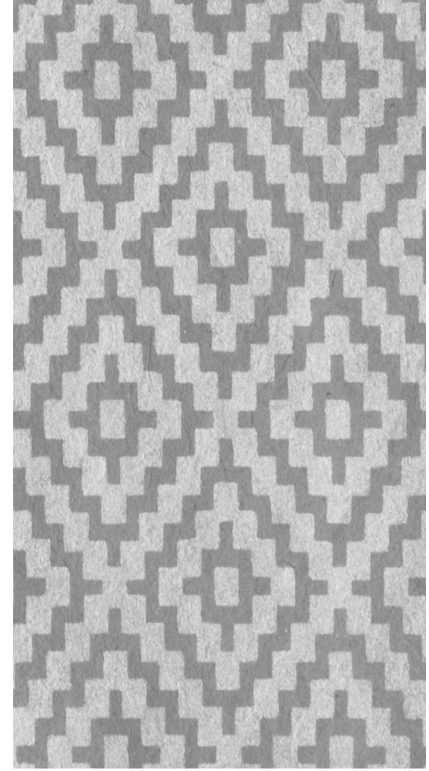
Additionally, I would like to thank my friend Jennifer Cardona for having captured – so beautifully – the key concepts of this inquiry in the cover design of my book: First, the increasingly interconnected relations between public and private in matters related to sustainability. Second, the interwoven nature of theory and practice as experienced in action research. And third, the possibility of capturing and sharing the richness of social texture through narratives.

I would also like to thank all the colleagues at the Environmental Governance group of Utrecht University. The coffee breaks, drinks, dinners, and challenging discussions we shared were a great motivation in completing this project. The same goes to my friends and family in Mexico. I feel grateful for their everlasting support, especially during the craziest periods of this project.

This research project was only part of the larger project of living in the Netherlands. The experience of living in Utrecht for six years has profoundly changed my view of the world and myself. I feel extremely fortunate for all the life-long friends I made over my Dutch years and for having had the opportunity to share this unique phase of my life with them.

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Luli Pesqueira
Mexico City, November 2014



PART I

Defining a Research Theme and Approach

1. ■ Exploring the option of collaborative research

November 2009, I decided to pursue a PhD degree in the field of Governance for Sustainable Development at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Then, I already had some idea of the direction I wanted my research to take, so when I met with my first supervisor, Prof. Pieter Glasbergen, it was relatively easy to consider the different forms that my research could take. We discussed my interest for conducting research for and with an organization and started to sketch some ideas of what such collaboration could be. We agreed that the first step would be to contact some organizations that we thought could be interested in and profit from engaging in collaborative research with our team. With these criteria in mind, we identified four organizations that met this profile, namely, Oxfam Novib, WWF, SOMO (Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen), and the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative (Initiatief Duurzame Handel).

We selected these four organizations because they are engaged in public-private interactions and/or multi-stakeholder arrangements, which are the focus of our research group, the Utrecht-Nijmegen Program on Partnerships (UNPOP). UNPOP, (which moved its headquarters to Maastricht University in 2011 and changed its name to MUNPOP), studies partnerships for sustainable development. Partnerships here are defined as a type of collaborative arrangements that include stakeholders from the public and private spheres of society dealing with pressing social and environmental issues.

MUNPOP's research is based on the need to better understand and define the roles and functions of various types of multi-stakeholder arrangements or partnerships, their architecture, the conditions that constrain their performance, and the implications in terms of governance for sustainable development. The program is part of the theoretical debates on new forms of national and international governance and contributes to the discussion on green alliances, self-regulation, cooperative regimes, trans-national action, global action networks, and civic engagement in sustainability policymaking.

Specifically, Oxfam Novib and WWF are non-governmental organizations that engage in partnerships and multi-stakeholder arrangements, for they regard them as spaces for dialogue and negotiation on topics like improved corporate practices and sustainability. SOMO is a non-profit organization that conducts research on corporate policies and practices, aiming to contribute to ending the negative consequences of globalization. And lastly, the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative is a platform that forges coalitions between governments, companies, trade unions, and social organizations with the objective of up-scaling the production of sustainable commodity products.

Gaining access to an organization or group of people is not always a smooth process. There are occasions in which practitioners approach researchers in order to commission a project (e.g. consulting or evaluation) and in which agreement is reached in a relatively short period of time. When the situation is reversed and it is the researchers who approach practitioners looking for collaboration, the researchers might encounter challenges in acquiring access to an organization. In such cases, it is helpful to remember that research is often a time-consuming activity and not everyone possesses sufficient time and resources to participate in it.

Also, corporate confidentiality policies might prevent people or whole organizations from engaging in inquiry processes for fear of exposure or criticism. But most importantly, engaging in

a research project can be daunting for some people, especially those with different backgrounds who might feel uncomfortable participating in the inquiry.

Some of the most important requisites for securing access to a group or organization include gaining their trust, defining contributions, and establishing clear expectations of the research process. The first crucial event is to arrange a face-to-face meeting in which people can exchange ideas about the collaboration and explain their concerns. In this meeting, it is important that the other party gets a good impression of what the benefits of collaboration are, and that some level of trust and commitment is reached.

This can be achieved, for instance, by setting a date for the next meeting or for the delivery of a formal written proposal. It is also important to negotiate and agree on what each party will bring to the table, as well as on the workload and responsibility allocation of the people involved. Occasionally, responsibility structures need to be put in place (who reports to whom) and communication lines need to be open (who talks to whom).

Experiences have shown that collaboration should be developed on the basis of honesty and recognition of the different sets of interests and motivations between parties (Curşeu & Schruijer, 2010; Kleine, 2008). Talking openly about the motivations and expectations that each party has in the inquiry from the beginning of the process can help to define its aim and clarify the positions of the researchers and practitioners. Drafting a memorandum of understanding or some sort of contract can also be useful to remind each party of its role and commitment to the research and can be used as a guideline in case a disagreement emerges at any stage of the inquiry process. Some authors have also suggested that initial contact between the researcher and the stakeholders should be informative and neutral (Stringer, 1999).

Keeping these recommendations in mind, I wrote and sent an e-mail to the organizations that we had identified as potential collaborators for the research. The next textbox displays a copy of this initial e-mail.

Within only a few days, I received positive responses from SOMO, Oxfam Novib, and IDH. I exchanged a few e-mails with their representatives and we set a date for a first meeting at which the specifics of the collaboration would be discussed. WWF did not confirm a date for a meeting, so we decided to wait until we knew the outcome of the meetings with the other organizations before contacting them again. At this point, we also decided that since the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative had been created in 2009, it was a very young arrangement, which could potentially limit the scope of the research. Thus, we decided to limit our participation to Oxfam Novib and SOMO at this initial stage.

Dear Mr. X,

My name is Luli Pesqueira, I recently graduated from the MSc in Sustainable Development program at Utrecht University and received a grant to conduct research for 36 months as part of a PhD program also within Utrecht University, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Pieter Glasbergen, and as part of the Utrecht-Nijmegen Programme of Partnerships (UNPOP) – for more information on UNPOP go to www.unpop.nl.

I am interested in conducting research in cooperation with an organization that has a particular research interest and which is willing to collaborate in this project and share its results. The proposition is to jointly develop a research plan that satisfies both the needs of your organization and UNPOP, with the possibility of having me as an in-house researcher.

I would appreciate if you would agree to meet with me to further discuss any possibilities for collaboration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Luli Pesqueira, MSc.
Department of Innovation and Environmental Sciences
Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University
l.pesqueira@geo.uu.nl
www.geo.uu.nl / www.unpop.nl

FIGURE 1: COPY OF E-MAIL SENT TO ORGANIZATIONS

2. Meeting with practitioners and exchanging visions

After contacting the organizations that I wanted to collaborate with, the next step was to arrange a meeting to further discuss our research interests and explore whether they converged or not. Ideally, this would be done face-to-face, in a comfortable space, with enough time to discuss our ideas.

An ex-colleague of mine who was a good friend of somebody working at SOMO was kind enough to help me arrange a meeting with that organization. Arranging to meet was particularly easy since it was done through a third party who knew us both. During the meeting, this connection was especially helpful for building rapport between people at SOMO and myself. Another factor that contributed to facilitating communication between us was that we are both foreigners and come from the same world region. These circumstances allowed the meeting to take place in a relaxed manner. The meeting took place in Amsterdam at SOMO's office. I was invited for lunch, and was surprised to find that I also knew two other people working there. I believe that this provided SOMO with some extra references about me and positively impacted the outcomes of the meeting.

During the meeting we discussed possibilities for collaboration and we identified some issue-areas in both our lines of research. We agreed on a few actions to follow, which basically involved sending a brief document on my research interests and a description of how we envisioned the collaboration between MUNPOP and SOMO. After some exchanges with people at SOMO, it became clear that the proposal of collaboration centered on research was not particularly attractive, since they were already a research organization.

A few days later when I received an email from Oxfam Novib inviting me to meet with the Coordinator of the Private Sector Program, I sensed that there would be more possibilities of collaborating with them. Moreover, having received two positive responses from the organizations that I had selected reassured me of the value of what I was trying to achieve. It gave me more confidence about doing research in a participatory way and provided me with ammunition against those who raised an eyebrow when I mentioned my choice of action research and the fact that I had no research question to guide me yet.

The meeting with Oxfam was held at their office in The Hague at 16:00 hrs. The purpose of this meeting was to explore whether Oxfam Novib had a research need that could be of interest to us; to present the work of our research team and our expertise; and to understand more about Oxfam Novib's Private Sector Program and their involvement in various multi-stakeholder initiatives.

Two members of Oxfam's Private Sector Program, my supervisor, and I attended the meeting. After exchanging common courtesies and getting a cup of coffee/tea, we proceeded to explain the reasons we had approached them and our expectations of the meeting. My supervisor gave a brief introduction about the MUNPOP research group and the main topics and analytical perspectives used in current and past research projects. Then, it was my turn to speak of my educational and professional background, my research expertise, and myself in general. In an attempt to strengthen rapport with the people sitting at the other side of the table, I emphasized my work experience in the private and public sectors and my familiarity with working under time and

budget constraints. With regards to my research expertise, I spoke about my Master thesis and other research projects in which I had participated at Utrecht University.

Next, Oxfam practitioners offered information about some of the lines of work of their organization dealing with issues of income and security, impact of value chains on communities, financial services, and corporate social responsibility. With regards to the Private Sector Program, they explained how the activities of the program link up to the contributions of civil society organizations (CSOs) to change unsustainable practices, the role of advocacy and NGO activities in complex settings, and the use of a rights-based approach (RBA) in planning and social change processes.

Regarding this latter issue, we learned that Oxfam uses the rights-based approach as a practical concept that guides most of its intervention strategies. This approach is built on the recognition of a legally binding normative framework of rights, entitlements, duties, responsibilities and accountability, which makes it a powerful tool to analyze the standards and principles of development activities (Hunt, Nowak, & Osmani, 2002).

About 15 years ago, Oxfam embraced the rights-based approach as a response to the limited success of previous approaches and as a way to impact power inequalities in the development process. Using a rights-based planning framework allows Oxfam to identify ways of empowering people as right-holders who demand accountability and of holding states and others to be accountable to citizens (Brouwer et al., 2005). The adoption of a rights-based approach, however, is inherently political since rights cannot be truly exercised without changes in the structures and relationships of power (Hickey & Mitlin, 2009b). The implications of this for development agents is that they are no longer the implementers of development programs but, rather, the allies of social movements and peoples' organizations in the collective struggle for change.

The rights-based approach has permeated from one organization to another and has become a guiding force to programming and budget allocation in the international development arena. At the practical level, however, the implementation of rights-based approaches still poses important challenges to development organizations, including Oxfam. During our meeting with at Oxfam Novib, it became clear that practitioners were operating on the basis of a number of underlying assumptions regarding the rights-based approach, which were implicit in their everyday practice and demanded closer attention.

The meeting lasted approximately 90 minutes and was much more formal and demanding than the meeting with SOMO had been. By the time this meeting took place, I had become more aware of the complexity of what I was trying to achieve. Establishing research collaboration with another organization is actually a demanding process in which questions and approaches must be jointly defined, and in which expectations that are relevant for both groups must be met. Besides this, the process also requires dealing with various practical issues related to time frames, financial and technical resources, information access, and confidentiality.

As we discussed possible research angles and the conditions needed for the collaboration to take place, we engaged in a dialogue process in which both practitioners and researchers tried to reveal the constructions of the other group. According to Stringer (1999), constructions are created realities that exist as integrated, systematic, sense-making representations. The aim of this first encounter was to discover the specific views that we held about multi-stakeholder collaboration initiatives (MSIs), in order to find common ground – a joint construction of the issue at hand.

In the literature, this process is called a *hermeneutic dialectic* process since new meanings emerge as divergent views are compared and contrasted (Stringer, 1999). This process is expected to take

place at many different stages of the research process as practitioners and researchers try to achieve a higher-level of synthesis, consensus, or clarification of different perspectives.

In this case, the result of this process was the creation of a preliminary picture of the research context. Through dialogue and exchange of ideas, we were able to identify issues/concepts that were relevant both for Oxfam Novib and our research group. The meeting ended with an agreement to develop a research proposal on the basis of our conversation. As someone at Oxfam Novib put it, the proposal needed to be brief, clear, and so interesting that they would not be able to turn it down.

The outcomes of the meeting fulfilled all of our expectations. Oxfam Novib practitioners were enthusiastic with the idea of collaboration and became actively engaged in the discussion. We interpreted the fact that we were able to reach certain agreements as a positive beginning. Minutes after the meeting, my supervisor and I drove back from The Hague to Utrecht feeling convinced about the feasibility of the collaboration. By the time we got to Utrecht, we had identified two main knowledge/practice gaps that would be interesting to explore in the research proposal:

- i. Engagement of Oxfam Novib with the private sector around the creation of sustainability certification schemes, as well as in development projects and public campaigns which are usually based on a set of assumptions and expectations that are not always made explicit or tested.
- ii. The articulation of rights-based principles in private sector interventions and its theoretical and practical challenges.

3. ■ Defining a research approach: Action research

One of the early challenges in most types of research relates to the actual definition or framing of the inquiry. Framing refers to the details that shape the research. Some of these details include a research question, a method, an approach, and some justification for having chosen them. The nature of each of these characteristics should be appropriate for each specific study; no specific question or method is applicable to every research. Before writing a research proposal for Oxfam Novib, I had to define some of the characteristics that would shape my project and position my research in the scientific field.

Since my research would not be limited to working at a desk, my supervisor suggested that I frame the research as an action research project. I had heard that concept before, but I was not completely sure about what it entailed. The name sounded appropriate, though. I got immersed in literature and tried to understand what makes action research different from conventional social research.

Action research is a collaborative, self-reflective, and systematic form of inquiry that aims to generate knowledge and social change through participation (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). This kind of research is shaped by a participatory inquiry worldview and follows the principle that researchers should work with practitioners, not only to increase their understanding, but to effect change, generate knowledge, and empower stakeholders (Bradbury, 2010). Participatory forms of inquiry assume the researcher and the object of inquiry to be interactively linked; they seek to ground research findings in experiential knowledge and to achieve democratization by involving participants in decisions about the objectives and uses of the research (Heron & Reason, 1997).

Although the origins of action research are somewhat unclear in the literature, they are often attributed to Kurt Lewin, who in the 1940's constructed a theory of action research. Here, he argued that to understand and change social practices, scientists should include practitioners from the social world in all stages of the inquiry (Bradbury, 2010; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Huxham & Vangen, 2003). Diverse theoretical foundations, including pragmatic philosophy, critical thinking, feminism, Marxism, educational theories, humanistic and transpersonal physiology, and constructionist theory, have influenced action research. Moreover, action researchers often make reference to the work of John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Richard Rorty, among others.

From its origins, different and often contrasting conceptualizations of action research have emerged, embodying diverse movements based on more than one narrative, yet sharing similarity in values, approaches to the empirical field, and commitments to mutual learning. In their book, *Introduction to Action Research*, Greenwood and Levin (2007) explain that the first applications of action research can be traced back to the Northern tradition of industrial democracy, which broadly spread across the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Japan.

The industrial democracy movement pushed businesses to reinvent their industrial management strategies and engage their workers in continuous innovation processes at the shop-floor level. Lewin's thinking also had an important influence on the development of the industrial democracy movement, especially his conceptualization of social change and his work on group dynamics. In

contemporary action research, change processes have shifted away from the Lewinian formulation and are currently characterized by an emphasis of ongoing dialogue and co-generative learning as vehicles for change.

A second major strand of action research emerged with the democratization efforts of overt oppression and liberationist movements. These approaches to action research vary largely in terms of politics, aims, and methods, but are similar in that they emerged from great undemocratic situations such as colonial exploitation, genocide, and impoverishment (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Within this camp, some of the most common action research approaches are southern participatory action research (PAR), participatory research, and participatory community research. Though all of these approaches differ to some extent, they share the aim of equalizing power relations and redistributing resources.

In light of its diverse applications, it is possible to see why the term action research is used to represent a “family of practices” (Bradbury, 2010: 94), which have similar values and approaches to the empirical field. These different strands of thinking have resulted in a variety of action research practices that range from more technical approaches, to more deliberative and critical ones. Some examples include pragmatic action research, participatory action research, educational action research, participatory evaluation, participatory rural appraisal, co-operative inquiry, and action science.

What unifies these mixed approaches is the challenging of the dominant positivistic worldview and the stressing of the participatory element. Like most alternative inquiry paradigms that are still in formative stages, action research is a work in progress and is thus continuously contested and improved (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Co-Operative Inquiry

The project that I had in mind took the form of a cooperative inquiry, an approach centered on producing knowledge that is useful for people in their day-to-day life and based on dynamic, ongoing inquiry processes. A London-based research group formed in 1977 by John Heron, Peter Reason, and John Rowan elaborated the co-operative inquiry approach. Reason and Heron argue that the constructivist inquiry paradigm is “unclear about the relationship between constructed realities and the original givenness of the cosmos” (1997: 274). They suggest that a worldview based on participation is more useful and that a participatory reality allows us to join fellow humans in the inquiry process.

Their participatory paradigm requests that all people involved in the inquiry engage in a democratic dialogue: co-researchers and co-subjects collaborate to define the questions they want to explore and the way in which they should be explored. The research, then, is not done by researchers on other people, but by people mutually researching each other.

Accordingly, co-operative inquiry is interested in shaping *humanness* in research and demands that the researcher gradually involves him or herself in the inquiry process, connecting emotional insights with explicit reflections. Throughout their work, Reason and Heron (1997) have laid the following conditions for co-operative inquiry:

- Participants need to be fully involved at all stages of the inquiry process as co-researchers;
- Interaction between sense-making (interpretation) activities and the results of experience (inquiry process) and action (research outcomes) need to be well coordinated.
- Issues of validity should be treated as central questions in the process.

So far, the New Paradigm Research Group has done notable work regarding the development of an epistemology of inquiry that involves four different ways of knowing:

- Experiential knowing emerges from direct face-to-face encounters with a person, a place, or a thing. It implies knowing through empathy and resonance; an in-depth knowing that is almost impossible to put into words.
- Presentational knowing emerges out of experiential knowing and provides the first forms of expression through imagery, story, drawing, movement, etc.
- Propositional knowing draws on concepts and ideas and is 'about' something. It draws on ideas and theories and is expressed in informative statements.
- Practical knowing consummates other forms of knowing in action. It is about knowing 'how to' do something and is expressed in a skill or competence.

This extended epistemology suggests that if our knowing is grounded in our experience, expressed through stories and images, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in meaningful action in our lives, then knowing will be far richer, deeper, and more valid and useful (Reason & Wicks, 2009).

Cycles of action and reflection

In co-operative inquiry, all four forms of knowing – experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical – manifest themselves throughout the research process as researchers and practitioners engage in cycles of action and reflection (Heron & Reason, 1997). These cycles include four different phases, called *inquiry phases*, which are repeated several times during the inquiry. The first phase begins when a group of researchers and practitioners come together to explore areas of inquiry and the last occurs when the initial questions have been answered (Vignali & Zundel, 2003).

Phase one

Here, researchers and practitioners focus on their interests and concerns and agree on the focus of the inquiry, for which they develop a set of questions or propositions to be explored. They also agree on some procedures by which they can observe and record each other's experience. In phase one, propositional knowing is mostly used, but it usually will incorporate important elements of presentational knowing as the group members use their imagination in story, fantasy, or graphics to articulate their interests and focus their purpose in the inquiry. This phase concludes with planning a method for exploring the idea in action and with devising ways of gathering and recording data.

Phase two

In this phase, the group initiates actions, observing and recording the outcomes. Co-researchers become co-subjects as they engage in the actions agreed upon and begin to notice how practice does and does not conform to their original ideas. Phase two involves mainly practical knowledge: knowing how to engage in appropriate action.

Phase three

This phase is the touchstone of the inquiry method as co-subjects become fully immersed in and engaged with their experience; they might even lose awareness of their participation in the inquiry process. They develop a degree of openness to the process and become free of preconceptions. They are able to deepen their ideas, as superficial understanding becomes more elaborated, thus allowing them to explore new ideas. Phase three mostly involves experiential knowing, which can be richer if recorded or expressed through creative presentational forms.

Phase four

In this phase, the initial questions are re-considered in light of the experience obtained during the previous phases. Participants might decide to change, reject, or pose new questions before agreeing on a new cycle of action and reflection. The group can decide to develop the inquiry further in any direction. Phase four involves mainly the state of propositional knowing, although presentational forms of knowing can extend a bridge between the experiential and practical phases.

Once phase four is completed, it is likely that the inquiry cycle will begin again and that this will be repeated several times as the investigation of one aspect of the inquiry leads to the exploration of other issues. With each cycle, the group is likely to become more cohesive and self-critical as it develops new skills and understandings. Ideally, the inquiry will be finished when the initial and emergent questions and concerns have been thoroughly addressed in practice, and when congruence between the four kinds of knowing is found.

In reality, however, the process is not as straightforward as this model suggests. There are usually mini-cycles within major cycles. Co-operative inquiry is a method of iterative nature based on cycles of action and reflection, and is therefore dependent on the development of healthy human interaction.

Furthermore, co-operative inquiry also makes a distinction between three different *dimensions of inquiry* in which the practice of action research can take place: first, second, and/or third person research. These three dimensions respond to what Reason and Torbert (2001) have defined as research for *me*, for *us*, and for *them*; meaning that research can speak to three audiences.

First-person research deals with the ability of a researcher to foster an approach of inquiry to his or her own life. It involves critical examination of the researcher's daily behavior, self-observation-in-action, as well as assessment of impact and congruence.

After reading the literature, the research that I had in mind seemed to be close to second person research. Therefore, my research is a second-person research based on collaboration, engagement, and dialogue with others through face-to-face interaction. Here, all those engaged in the project participate as co-researchers and co-subjects, jointly forming the questions to be explored, the methods to be employed, and making sense of their experiences. It is of dialogic, consensus-seeking nature, and offers a powerful form of validity testing thereof.

Third-person research aims to create a wider community of inquiry involving different people, even if they do not come into face-to-face contact. Third-person research attempts to create the conditions that support first and second person inquiry within a wider community by empowering participants. It can be applied in contexts of organizational change, organizational development, and broader social change, in which power and the movements of power are particularly relevant.

4. Writing a PhD dissertation in the form of a journal

In my exploration of action research literature, I was surprised to find that there was more written *about* action research than action research studies *per se*. Perhaps the reason for this is that many action research projects have the objective of producing knowledge that is locally relevant and can address the immediate needs of people in specific settings. Contrary to this, a doctoral dissertation aims to make knowledge claims that can be generalizable, or transferable, beyond the immediate setting. In this sense, an action research dissertation needs to combine scholarship with practical information in such way that it produces knowledge about social practices that can generate new theory or that can be relevant to other similar contexts.

Generally speaking, participatory research approaches permit us to capture the richness and complexity of social interaction and to translate it into insightful descriptions and actionable concepts. Yet, traditional scientific outlets are not broad enough to adequately capture the problematization of social practices, nor the reflexivity involved in action research.

In order to overcome such limitations, I decided to write my doctoral dissertation in the form of a journal, taking advantage of my unique position, collecting and recording insights about the inquiry process and the practice I was involved in. Journal writing in action research is used as a vehicle for uncovering a situation in a two-fold manner: on the one hand, as an empirical approach for recording and analyzing facts and, on the other, as a phenomenological approach for discovering the expression of professional life and the role of the researcher.

Journal writing has been extensively used as a technique in qualitative research (Janesick, 1999). Some of the first journals recorded were written during Greek and Roman times. Later, priests and members of courts around the world used journals to chronicle their own lives and document how the mind worked. Spiritual journeys, adventures, and revolutions have also been logged in the personal accounts of people who kept diaries. In the arts and humanities, journal writing is considered a major source of data and a great vehicle for qualitative researchers to understand their role in the process of inquiry.

Additionally, journal writing serves a powerful heuristic tool, allowing qualitative researchers to become more aware of their own thinking and reflection patterns, as well as more precise in describing and explaining their work. In this sense, I also found that writing research accounts in a journal enables researchers to label new insights, explain how they came to them, and declare their intentions to modify or change them (Oberg, 1990). Additionally, journals are used to triangulate information and promote interactive communication between researcher and participants.

Given the nature of the knowledge generation process that takes place through the engagement of researchers and practitioners, in a sequence of dialectic encounters, the write-up of the process and results do not necessarily have to adopt the forms of conventional social science. The participation and perspectives of the different stakeholders must be made explicit from their own positions and the use of narratives is central to conveying these processes of change.

Narratives are used in action research to “create a persuasive connectedness between theory and practice” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007: 62). For this purpose, action research writing often offers

detailed discussions of the processes that researchers and practitioners were involved in. Narratives are unique in revealing actions, thoughts, and struggles, which can make significant scientific contributions, for they record the cycles of experimentation, reflection, and sense-making that leads to research outcomes. Accordingly, narratives offer a writing genre that faithfully reflects the dynamic and developmental nature of action research, while recreating the key elements of the experiential learning.

Writing a dissertation in the form of a journal – instead of a traditional manuscript or a collection of scientific articles – allowed me to collectively create and personalize the research project and its results. During the research process, this journal was submitted on several occasions for revision and verification both to my supervisors and my colleagues at Oxfam Novib. As co-inquirers, we used my journal as a tool to probe each other's practice and as the basis for many reflections. This verification process helped to keep checks and balances on the entire research process, ensuring that the information contained in the journal had been triangulated and reviewed at multiple levels.

5. Drafting and sharing a preliminary research proposal

Writing a research proposal usually includes some fixed elements, for instance, the definition of a problem, a research question, a theoretical framing of the issue, and a methodology to deal with the problem and obtain answers to the research question. Following this structure and the agreements reached during my first meeting with Oxfam practitioners, I drafted a research proposal. At the heart of the proposal were the elements that we had already defined; namely, studying the implications of Oxfam's engagement with the private sector, particularly in multi-stakeholder initiatives, taking an action research approach to the inquiry, writing my dissertation in the form of a journal.

The research proposal suggested starting the project with an initial research question based on the topics we had discussed with Oxfam practitioners during our first meeting. Additionally, the proposal suggested drawing on accumulated theories, knowledge, and methods, together with insights and observations from practice to answer it. The question was:

In what ways and through which mechanisms does Oxfam articulate a rights-based approach in multi-stakeholder initiatives?

As for the rest, the proposal suggested other ideas that could be addressed in the various stages of the research project. These included determining the factors that accounted for the successful articulation of rights-based approaches in Oxfam's private sector work; analyzing the integration of economic, social, environmental, and human rights discourses by specific actors in specific multi-stakeholder arrangements; determining the contextual factors that affected Oxfam's private sector work; and ensuing recommendations to maximize the impact of Oxfam's collaboration with the private sector.

Lastly, the proposal stressed the participatory role of the researcher within Oxfam Novib, explaining that, as part of the work plan and research activities, I would participate in the day-to-day activities of the organization. This required spending four days of the week at Oxfam Novib in The Hague for two years, with full access to documents, reports, meetings, and events that were relevant to our study. In return for Oxfam Novib's openness, feedback, and guidance, I would perform some research tasks for the organization.

Receiving feedback from colleagues

MUNPOP meetings bring together all members of our research team. These meetings are held usually twice a year and are meant to provide a space for coordination of promotion and research activities and for discussion on research progress. During our February 10th 2010 meeting, three professors and three PhD candidates, including myself, were present.

At one point during the meeting, I was invited to introduce my work plan and myself. I started by telling some general things about my educational background, my nationality, my interests, and the scheme under which my research project was being financed. Then, I proceeded to talk about my research ideas, my interest in collaborating with an organization and the reasons for it. Lastly, I told them about the meeting with Oxfam Novib and explained how the outcomes of our discussion had given way to the research proposal they had received a week earlier.

Regarding the research proposal and work plan, the members of the MUNPOP team showed enthusiasm, especially because it suggested a novel way to conduct research and write a dissertation within our research program. Yet, they also showed concern about the proposal being too ambitious in terms of the number of issues I wanted to address.

One of the main differences between action research and formal or traditional research concerns the position of the researcher with respect to the object of study. In traditional research, the researcher is most often located at a distance from the social processes under study, whereas in action research the researcher acts as a sort of facilitator who tries to offer new perspectives on the basis of his/her observations and experience. For the inquiry to be successful, it is necessary that practitioners are involved in and agree with the definition of the research problem and objectives.

During our meeting, we also discussed and agreed that, given the nature of the research project, my dissertation would be a manuscript written in the form of a journal. Nowadays, it is common for doctoral dissertations to be made up of some articles independently published in scientific journals. However, this format was not completely suitable for my project due to the length and participants of my research. The richness of participatory research approaches can be better captured and communicated through thick descriptions and narratives, which are better portrayed in longer pieces of work. Similarly, the 36-month time period allocated for this project limited the possibilities for conducting the research and publishing its results in scientific journals simultaneously.

Additionally, we agreed that Prof. Pieter Leroy would become the second supervisor of my doctoral research. Prof. Leroy is professor of Political Sciences of the Environment at the Faculty of Management Sciences of Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands. He has great expertise on the design and implementation of environmental policy, and on the emergence and functioning of new policy arrangements in a context of more encompassing societal and political transformations. As co-chair of the MUNPOP Program, he has been a successful second supervisor to various Ph.D. candidates before me. All of these qualifications made me feel quite confident about his guidance during my research.

After receiving feedback from my colleagues at the MUNPOP meeting, I decided not to modify the research proposal until I received a reaction from Oxfam Novib. Therefore, I continued immersing myself more into the action research literature, hoping to get a better grip on its application, particularly because this had been a recurring topic during the MUNPOP meeting. Most of my colleagues had questions about the implications of taking an action research approach and linking it with traditional academic research. Such questions helped me realize that the why's and how's of using an action research approach needed to be better clarified in the proposal.

Two weeks later on February 2010, Oxfam Novib's Private Sector Coordinator called me to give me some comments on the proposal I had written. After exchanging some greetings, she mentioned that the organization was very enthusiastic about doing the research project. This pleased me; I was on the right track regarding their expectations!

Regarding the content of the research proposal, she suggested reworking a few points. In her view, the rights-based approach should not be the central part of the proposal since it was a practical concept used mostly for planning purposes. She wondered if it would be useful to look at the concept in a more theoretical way and to explore the possibilities for making it operational. Her second remark was that the proposal was very much focused on multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) and did not consider other intervention strategies used by Oxfam Novib. She explained that Oxfam Novib's engagement in such initiatives responded to a plan for supporting specific

debates or standard developments, which were often complementary to other intervention strategies, and thus should also be included in the scope of the research.

Thirdly, she suggested that Oxfam Novib should not be the only object of study, but that it should be expanded to include other Oxfam affiliates and partner organizations, especially NGOs in the South. And lastly, she recommended that I met with her and other members of the organization in the following weeks to discuss ways to shape the proposal and its feasibility. She also asked me to meet with the Director of the Private Sector Program to further discuss our expectations and the practical matters of me joining Oxfam Novib.

In any action research project, changes and adaptations to the research problem and the way it is approached are considered an indicator of the robustness of the study, since they ensure its *internal credibility*; this is, credibility towards the group generating it. This also supports the notion that, in action research, the focus of the inquiry is determined by what the participants consider important (Greenwood & Levin, 2007).

After Oxfam Novib's positive response, concerns regarding my immersion in its organizational context continued to increase. Stringer (1999) explains how the researcher must make herself available to the research participants immediately. Meeting with more people at Oxfam Novib, meant having to introduce myself to a larger community of practitioners and making them feel that they had something to contribute to the research project. Making practitioners part of the process and granting importance to their input would help to ensure ownership, an important element of action research.

Integrating the views of practitioners

Weeks later on early March 2010, I found myself sitting on the train from Utrecht to The Hague on my way to meet with the Director of the Private Sector Program at Oxfam Novib. I felt like I was attending a job interview. And, in a way, I was. I had chosen a sober outfit; it was mainly black with a bright pink scarf. A touch of color has never hurt anyone, especially during the grey March days. I mentally reviewed the reasons why I was there and the objectives that I wanted to accomplish.

When I arrived at Oxfam Novib, I announced myself in Dutch, trying to get into character. Minutes later, the Private Sector Coordinator came to welcome me, offered me a cappuccino, and together we walked into the Director's office. As soon as I saw her, the Director struck me as a woman of action. She opened up the conversation by telling me how enthusiastic she was about collaborating with our research team and having me working with them. She mentioned that since this was her first experience with this type of collaboration, she had some reservations and questions about confidentiality and information ownership that she wanted to discuss with my supervisor. This was to be expected.

We spent the next 15 to 20 minutes of the conversation exchanging thoughts and views on the work of NGOs in developing countries and the challenges faced by the new Oxfam affiliates in Brazil, India, and Mexico. Here, she pointed towards the need for a more systematic understanding of the different markets/contexts in which Oxfam was active, so as to develop a more coherent strategy for approaching the private sector at the global level.

After a while, the conversation returned to the issue at hand: me. We talked about my previous research experience on the sustainability of agri-commodity chains based on my master thesis and a research project carried out with the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), in which I had participated in 2009. This project was commissioned by the PBL to Utrecht University and sought to investigate the roles of governments in multi-stakeholder sustainable

supply chain governance systems and the effectiveness of their interventions (Vermeulen et al., 2010).

The study asked what strategies and instruments governments (national, supranational) use in promoting sustainable production and consumption in global supply chains and what is known about the effectiveness of such strategies and instruments. In order to answer this question, the study looked into a number of market-based sustainability certification systems for tropical timber and tropical commodities (cocoa, coffee, and tea) and assessed the involvement and support of governments in the initiation and implementation phases of the systems, comparing evidence from The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

Actors from the market and civil society were found to play a dominant role in initiating and governing these systems, while the governments' role was described as one of "side line support", in combination with using its market power as an institutional consumer through public procurement policies. Specifically at the initial stage of the systems studied, the role of governments was found to be very limited. All certification initiatives were established independently by private actors, sometimes in spite of adversarial government activity or at best with limited support.

At the implementation stage, the study found that governments had supported private certification systems using a broader range of activities, which were both directed to the demand and supply sides. Some of the instruments used included regulation, bilateral inspection agreements, traceability obligations for importers, financial and promotional support, raising consumer awareness, special tax arrangements, and public procurement.

Additionally, the study drew attention to the more active role taken recently by the governments of Germany and The Netherlands, for instance, through the creation of the Dutch Sustainable Trading Initiative, an arrangement that facilitates cooperation between the main stakeholders of a number of product chains and the up-scaling of existing certification systems.

When I finished describing the study and its outcomes, Oxfam's Private Sector Director was particularly curious about my thoughts on the interaction between governments and private sustainability initiatives. Based on the conclusions reached in our study, I discussed the different approaches taken by the governments of Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, explaining how the views of the people I had interviewed had led me to believe that government support of private initiatives is essential. Such support, however, should be indirect; for instance, through the creation of an enabling environment where innovation and competition between certification schemes can take place.

We concluded the reunion by talking some more about the possibilities of collaboration and stressing the importance of setting the *game rules* beforehand. Personally, I would assure that my supervisor contacted Oxfam to discuss confidentiality and clarify what my activities within Oxfam would be. Additionally, I agreed to meet with the rest of the Private Sector team to further review the research proposal and to send a copy of my master thesis and my curriculum vitae. All in all, it had been a good meeting and its objective was accomplished. As I walked to the train station, I had a positive feeling; we had gotten off on the right foot!

After a few emails and serious agenda coordination, a new meeting was scheduled for March 25th 2010 with the Private Sector Coordinator and two other members of the Private Sector Team. The goal of the meeting was to jointly explore the research needs of the team and to identify research topics that were of interest to them. We began the meeting by introducing the work we did, progressively diving into overlapping areas of interests. Our conversation was mainly focused on the issues of poverty, human rights, and sustainability in relation to global value chains.

Global value chains are a manifestation of globalization and the integratedness of global flows and exchanges. The integration structure and uneven power balance of these chains have raised questions about their social and environmental impacts, particularly in the agri-food sector. Agri-food sectors not only deal with agricultural production, but also with food processing and the development of high value added products and non-food biomaterials.

These sectors are affected by controversies on land grabbing, food security, and poverty issues and are increasingly receiving attention from nongovernmental organizations. Oxfam takes a value chain approach to address the social and environmental impacts of the global production and trade of key agri-food products like palm oil, soy, aquaculture, cocoa, tropical timber, coffee, and biofuels.

Besides the Coordinator of Oxfam's Private Sector Team, none of the other members had read my research proposal. Therefore, I gave a brief explanation of the topics, and asked the participants to tell me what they thought was necessary and worth investigating. For the next hour, we engaged in an informal discussion on the issues that they considered relevant to their work and also identified gaps in knowledge and practice. Our conversation was unstructured, as there were no pre-established issues for discussion. Anecdotes, suggestions, and questions were thrown into the conversation as I made notes in my workbook, trying to identify the issues that were meaningful for both Oxfam and my research group.

At the end of the meeting I felt an information overload; so many issues had been discussed. I agreed with the Private Sector Coordinator that I would review my notes, integrate the team's suggestions into the research proposal, and send it to her two weeks later. A day later, back at my desk at Utrecht University, I reformulated their comments into questions and grouped them into categories:

Oxfam and the value chain approach

- How can Oxfam drive support in a particular value chain by better connecting the different links/parties along it?
- How does Oxfam best transfer capacity to other actors in the chain? How are new spaces for credibility and engagement opened?
- What factors determine the type of strategy chosen to change practices in a value chain and what determines its success?
- What is Oxfam's added value and how can it be leveraged?

Multi-stakeholder initiatives

- How is a rights-based approach to development articulated in multi-stakeholder arrangements?
- Should a gender approach be incorporated to multi-stakeholder initiatives, and if so, how could this be done?
- How can social, environmental, and food safety aspects be integrated into one overarching standard and how can the tensions between the three be overcome?
- How can Oxfam ensure that multi-stakeholder initiatives not cause a race-to-the-bottom effect, with standards being stringent enough? How can the applicability of standards be ensured?

Role of governments

- To what extent is private regulation filling a governance vacuum, especially in developing nations?
- To what extent can private regulation undermine the public accountability of governments?

Looking at these questions, I noticed that most of the issues were in line with what had been previously identified. The one thing that had not been mentioned before and which came up during this session was the need to investigate and define what the added value of Oxfam's approach to engaging with the private sector was. Members of the Private Sector Team were quite clear about what their work had achieved so far and about its potential. Nevertheless, they were not completely sure about the aspects that made them the best at what they did. They had an idea of what their strengths were and on the traits that differentiated their approach from other NGOs; yet, they lacked a comprehensive understanding of what their leverage points were.

With these ideas in mind, I reviewed the research proposal and incorporated some of the comments from my supervisors and colleagues at the University, as well as some of the suggestions put forward by the practitioners at Oxfam Novib. From this moment onwards, I became engaged in a learning process together with my supervisors and Oxfam Novib practitioners. It was in this process that we began communicating and creating new understandings through the exchange of different discourses that appeared over time.

6 ■ Revising the research proposal and agreeing on collaborative research

During the last days of March 2010, I went on vacation for a few days and took some time to think about how I was going to integrate the comments that I had received and to decide which elements I would keep in the proposal, and which would be left out. Tough choices had to be made. I had received feedback and suggestions from four different groups of people and now I had to find a way to integrate their somewhat divergent advice.

As suggested by some people at Oxfam Novib, I decided to broaden the scope of the research to include other units of analysis in addition to Oxfam. This meant that the research would not be exclusively focused on Oxfam Novib, but would include its wider network of organizations, including other Oxfam affiliates, partner NGOs in developing countries, local communities, international donors, research institutes, etc. Additionally, the research would not look exclusively into multi-stakeholder initiatives, but would also take into consideration other intervention strategies such as lobbying and campaigning.

The most important advice of my colleagues at Utrecht University concerned the nature of the research question. In the first draft of the research proposal, the question was quite analytical and thus not completely appropriate for an action research study. In action research, questions must be actionable, that is, they should turn inquiry into action. In light of this, I reformulated the original research question of the project and added an additional one:

In what ways and through which mechanisms is a rights-based approach articulated in multi-stakeholder initiatives, and what implications does this pose for their design and impact, as well as for Oxfam's participation in such initiatives?

How can Oxfam achieve leverage to systematically improve the sustainability of key global agri-food value chains through engagement with the private sector and the adoption of a rights-based approach to development?

On April 23th 2010, my supervisor met in The Hague with the Director and Coordinator of the Private Sector Program to finalize the collaboration agreement: we had been granted access to Oxfam Novib!

Later that evening, I received an email from my supervisor telling me that people at Oxfam were very enthusiastic about collaborating with our research group and having me as part of the Private Sector Team. He also mentioned that they were pleased with the idea of my thesis being written in the form of a journal. In terms of other agreements, they decided that I would dedicate one day per week to Oxfam Novib's research tasks and rest of the time to my own research. They also discussed that I would receive a small financial compensation for my activities and that my travel costs from Utrecht to The Hague would be covered.

Consequently, the collaboration contract drafted between MUNPOP and Oxfam Novib included the following elements:

- Duration of two years, with a progress evaluation every six months.

- Both parties can decide at any point to stop the collaboration if it fails to meet their expectations, with a two-month notice.
- Oxfam Novib provides the researcher with a flexible workspace and computer.
- The researcher dedicates on average one day a week to take on some of Oxfam Novib's research tasks and help with meeting preparations in so far as the topic/issue fits within her research.
- Oxfam Novib will cover all transportation costs and provide additional financial support in compensation for research work.
- The researcher works at The Hague from Monday to Thursday, and will spend Friday at Utrecht University.
- The project manager at Oxfam Novib is the Private Sector Program Coordinator.
- Oxfam Novib will need to approve anything before it is published externally.
- The collaboration will include research in other Oxfam member-organizations.

In the first week of June 2010, I received an email with a copy of the contract for my approval. A few days later, my supervisor and Oxfam's Director of the Private Sector Program had signed it. This meant that everything was set for me to start working at Oxfam on June 14th 2010.

As I read the email I could not believe it. After negotiating dialogue with Oxfam for six months, my starting date was due in only one week! My initial concerns were of a practical nature. I felt a little nervous and worried about my immersion in a new organization and the role that I would play in it. I called the Private Sector Coordinator to confirm what time I should be at Oxfam Novib the coming Monday. When we talked, we were both excited that the collaboration was finally starting. We agreed to meet at 9:30 am the next Monday and spend a couple of hours in an introductory session in which she would introduce me to some colleagues and explain practical things about the organization and its functioning.

7 ■ Conceptualizing NGO-business partnerships and the rights-based approach to development

Once having had defined action research as a research approach, the next step in defining the theme of the research project was to link it to different debates and trends that shape scientific research on NGO engagement with the private sector. Oxfam's approach towards the private sector can be best situated at a crossroads between two different perspectives: the first deals with the emergence and implications of the partnership phenomenon in the development field, while the second looks into the risks and opportunities of taking a rights-based approach to development.

Partnerships as collaborative arrangements for sustainable development

The approach taken by Oxfam towards the private sector can be best understood in a context in which new political spaces for global governance emerge, engaging private actors in the regulation of public affairs. Here, aspects related to development and the environment are no longer the sole responsibility of governments and international organizations, corporations have new roles to play and NGOs regard them as important actors to influence. Consequently, corporations are the targets of NGOs, not only in an oppositional sense, but also in a more relational and negotiated one.

This more constructive approach has led to public and private actors engaging in different collaboration formats, which range from partnerships and alliances, to roundtables and sector-wide platforms. In the MUNPOP research group, we have defined partnerships for sustainable development as non-hierarchical, self-organizing, and coordinating alliances usually formed by actors from two or more societal spheres (state, market, and civil society) to realize sustainability goals (Glasbergen, 2007).

Strategic interactions between businesses and NGOs have particularly become a common practice in the corporate social responsibility arena (Austin, 2007). Here, businesses and NGOs engage in collaborative formats with the objective of developing principles, norms, and standards to promote more sustainable production and consumption forms, while using the market as a steering mechanism.

The creation of such certification systems responds to what has been labelled as the "privatization of regulation" (Pattberg, 2005b: 1). This notion describes the transfer of regulatory tasks from public actors, such as nation states and intergovernmental organizations, to non-state actors like businesses and NGOs (Pattberg, 2005a). This shift has often been attributed to the decreasing capacity of the state to solve the manifold problems posed by global change (Biermann et al., 2007). In this image of a manageable society, private actors are considered partly accountable for public issues and states stimulate the self-governing capacities of diverse stakeholders (Glasbergen, Biermann, & Mol, 2007).

It has been estimated that the partnership phenomenon probably took off around the mid-1990's, after the 1992 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Rio de Janeiro. Then, the active involvement of all societal spheres was deemed necessary to resolve complex sustainability problems (UNEP, 1992). A decade later, at the 2002 WSSD in Johannesburg, partnerships received optimistic appraisal and were formally recognized as important tools for implementing sustainable development. Critics, however, have shown concern about the

emergence of partnerships as social steering mechanisms that emerged as response to the democratic deficit caused by the liberalization, privatization, and globalization processes (Bäckstrand, 2006; Kamat, 2004; Meadowcroft, 2007).

In particular, MUNPOP research has studied partnerships that aim at setting standards for environmentally and socially responsible production, encompassing voluntary codes of conduct and certification schemes. The main challenge that these types of partnerships take upon them is to regulate the supply of natural resources produced in developing countries and consumed globally. In this regard, the work of our team has assessed the legitimacy of partnerships and their actual contributions to making the cocoa, coffee, cotton, palm oil, and soy sectors more sustainable (see for instance Bitzer, 2011; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011).

In academic circles, the study of partnerships has most often taken the perspective of either an institution or an actor. The institutional perspective constitutes partnerships as new institutional governance arrangements and is mostly concerned with the roles and functions that partnerships (can) fulfil in shaping the governance of environmental and social issues and the institutional implications therein (see Pattberg, 2005a; Visseren-Hamakers & Glasbergen, 2007).

The actor perspective, on the other hand, regards partnerships as strategic devices for the advancement of actor-specific goals and looks into individual partnerships to identify reasons for partnering, its advantages and disadvantages, and the critical success factors (see Doherty & Tranchell, 2005; Gray & Yan, 1992; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Accordingly, collaborative governance arrangements in the agri-food field can either take the form of “institutionalized interactive platforms” (Van Huijstee, Francken, & Leroy, 2007: 28) in which whole sectors are involved, or more limited formats involving one company and one NGO.

While conducting a literature review on intersectoral collaboration for sustainable development, I found that partnerships and collaborative arrangements have been studied from different and often complementary theoretical angles. One of these angles explains the shift from governments in a central role, to governance as a mode of steering, in which market and civil society actors take responsibility as well. Here, governance as a change mechanism is based on cooperative relationships between public and private actors, relying on their assumed abilities to develop a common normative practice, as well as to shape the institutional context for change.

In broad strokes, these issues have been discussed in the literature from the perspectives of co-management, communicative governance, and collaborative governance. Such approaches stress the interactive processes through which public and private actors cooperate and public and private responsibilities may be connected (Carlsson & Sandström, 2008; Zadek, 2006).

Furthermore, a second theoretical angle underpinning the study of partnerships is business ethics theory. From this perspective, the ethical and moral responsibilities of private actors beyond their legal requirements, as well as their limits and reach, are analyzed. Business ethics theory suggests that even though businesses do not conceptually exist as political actors in liberal democracies, they have factual influence in the public sphere and responsibilities that go beyond compliance with basic legal requirements. In this sense, business ethics deals with the appropriate role of businesses in society, as well as with questions of morality and duty through the concepts of corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate citizenship, and corporate social performance (Casanova & Dumas, 2009; Van Huijstee, 2010).

In fact, the conceptualization of businesses as both public and private entities has been perhaps best elaborated in the concept of “corporate citizenship,” which assumes that businesses have a catalyst function regarding citizen rights (McShane et al., 2010; Ruggie, 2004). In this function, businesses play an assisting and supplementing role with regard to public responsibilities, becoming political actors to a certain extent. The conceptualization of businesses as political

actors is based on the amplified participation of firms in societal governance, particularly in terms of influence and the authoritative allocation of values and resources.

Rights-based approaches to development

The second contemporary debate around which my research is positioned has to do with the enforcement of human rights; and more specifically with the risks and opportunities faced by NGOs that take a rights-based approach to development. Oxfam's approach to poverty reduction and development is rooted in a rights-based approach, which provides process requirements for countervailing powers to be heard in the context of economic decision-making at the local and global level (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). Oxfam uses this approach to analyze and influence existing power relations so that people living in poverty can make claims and have a voice in decision-making spaces.

The concept of rights-based approaches to development emerged with the end of the Cold War, suggesting that development efforts should address the origins of poverty rather than its consequences (Hickey & Mitlin, 2009b). With this shift, the gap between the human rights and development traditions became narrower, as practitioners and academics recognized the contributions that these frameworks could offer to each other.

The use of the rights-based approach in international development project planning and implementation responds to a paradigm shift from a focus on people's needs to a focus on people's rights, which has been adopted by a great number of nongovernmental organizations, multilateral institutions, and international cooperation organizations. Rights-based approaches provide a framework to address systemic exclusion of social groups from the rights, resources, and opportunities that they are entitled to for achieving their full potential. The integration of rights and development ideas has been positively welcomed in some circles, even when the integration of concepts is still young and leaves people wondering what this institutional exchange can offer.

The human rights approach is systemic, consistent and logical; it is built on a set of principles and derives policy from them. Since the development approach is mostly pragmatic and has generated some inconsistent effects over time, some argue that it could benefit from the more transparent and systematic approach offered by the rights proponents (Sarelin, 2007; Schmidt-Traub, 2009). Still, the frictions between the two groups are not easy to resolve. Critics have argued that the rights-based approach can result in a new way of repackaging interventions or in the addition of an extra layer to the international development bureaucracy.

These controversies have put forward some issues for debate, forcing practitioners and academics to engage in a more thorough discussion on the multidimensionality and interconnectedness of social progress and its relation to human rights (Hickey & Mitlin, 2009b).

Oxfam shifted to a rights-based approach around the year 2000 and has successfully incorporated human rights language in its programs and campaigns for social and economic justice. The process, nevertheless, has been muddy and not always straightforward (Zimmerman & Aaronson, 2006). More clarification on how the rights-based approach is articulated and constituted in its different action strategies is still needed to advance the organization's general understanding of what the human rights framework offers to its development work.

The incorporation of human rights to development projects is a symptom of greater changes in the international development landscape, which cannot be overlooked in this project. The international development landscape has changed considerably in the last 50 years: not only have the underlying views on development shifted, but also the providers and recipients of development aid.

Around 30 years ago, development aid was provided mainly in the form of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) given by governments through their international development agencies or international development banks. Nongovernmental organizations and private corporations contributed with less than 10% of total aid (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009). In the last decades, however, NGOs have expanded their resource base and funded a wide range of programs and projects belonging to large and complex development portfolios. Additionally, large private foundations and millionaires have also joined the development industry contributing with more than US\$5 billion to international aid efforts in the last years and increasing the number of actors that are active in the field (Riddell, 2009).

Critics argue that most development policies of the last fifty years have not been successful since many countries are still heavily dependent on aid, with conditions in Africa and parts of Asia and Latin America having worsened in some cases (Kremer, van Lieshout, & Went, 2009). This situation has continued to raise questions about the effectiveness of development policies, foreign financial aid, and reform models that have been too focused on economic growth, forgoing the social dimensions and the environmental context in which development is embedded (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009).

In light of criticism and failed cases, the United Nations gave a new boost to development aid by setting in the year 2000 the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – a number of goals based on basic human rights – and getting the richest nations to commit to larger aid spending. The increasing interdependency between countries and issues (food, climate change, and health, for instance), along with the growing number of aid flows and players (China and India, for example), has challenged traditional approaches and points towards the emergence of a new development paradigm (see Dunning, 2006).

The emergence of this new paradigm signals the need for a multi-dimensional approach to development, one that is capable of simultaneously achieving multiple objectives and learning. Accordingly, this suggests considering issues of social texture, path dependencies, local contexts, and footprints, as well as a more aligned and interconnected relationship between poverty, aid, trade, and foreign direct investment (Kremer et al., 2009: 22).

8. Concluding thoughts

This research project was designed in collaboration with practitioners at Oxfam Novib using an action research design. In action research literature, most authors present models that link processes of action and reflection, combining them in spiraling cycles. Although I found these models initially helpful to understand the different components and stages of action research, they seemed to be more of an ideal than a representation of real life.

Already in the definition of the research theme and design of this project, I was able to witness how working with others – practitioners and researchers – made certain processes or decisions less straightforward. For example, integrating the views of my colleagues and Oxfam practitioners into the research proposal was not a linear process. Rather, it involved taking the comments and suggestions of people with different interests, weighing them, and deciding how to best integrate or reject them.

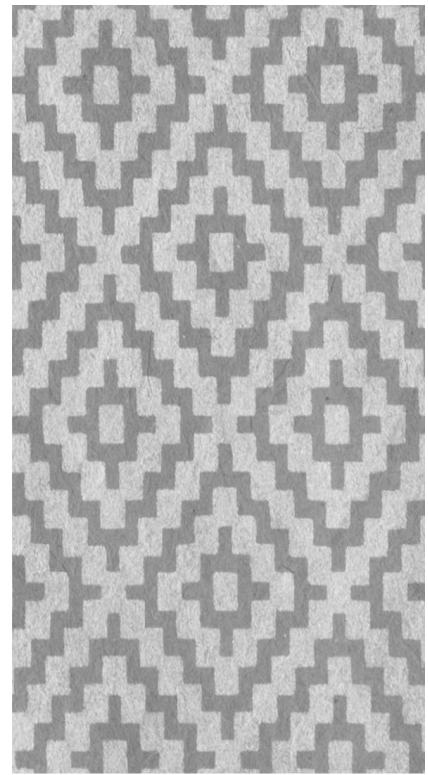
In this sense, the cycles of action and reflection that constitute action research did not occur in a specific order, with one preceding the other every time. In reality, most things occur in rather messy ways and one needs to be prepared to make decisions and learn on the go. In doing this project, not always was it possible to find a demarcated period of time in which to reflect about the actions that just occurred or which were about to take place. In fact, sometimes action and reflection just occurred simultaneously.

In my experience, I found that it was through conversations with others that I was able to make most sense of the situation that I was studying. For instance, it was during a general conversation about my research that I became aware of the three, interconnected levels of analysis that constituted my project:

- i. Research *about* Oxfam's Private Sector Program, including the strategies, choices, and assumptions that characterize it. This means collecting empirical evidence from an NGO's practice in order to advance our understanding of the articulation and operationalization of rights-based approaches to development in private sector interventions, including the tensions and limitations therein.
- i. Research that is relevant *for* Oxfam's practice, but also has scientific bearing. In my case, this involved finding a research theme that was relevant for Oxfam's Private Sector Team, but also theoretically significant for my research group, MUNPOP. Here, shedding light on the roles played and the interaction sustained between private actors – NGOs and businesses – in the creation of novel sustainability standards was a central objective.
- ii. Research *designed* as action research, thus looking into the interconnection between theory and practice, as well as into the role of researcher. This implied being aware and exploring how I thought about the things I thought about, as well as the ways in which, given my thoughts, I was able to initiate or engage in action.

Additionally, writing this journal was also a useful way to capture the ever-flowing nature of reality into a collection of episodes, from which patterns of action and thought could be recognized. Writing this journal, though, was not always easy. At various points in the process I drifted away from my own writing style, disconnecting from my own thought process and

depersonalizing my involvement in the research project. In these moments, findings and insights seemed to emerge from nowhere, as if they had always been there waiting to be discovered.



PART II

Opening up Communicative Space

9. ■ Uncovering the concept of communicative space

My main concern during my first weeks at Oxfam Novib was getting practitioners to become engaged in the research project, in addition to creating a sense of ownership of the process. To this end, I found the concept of communicative space especially useful. The idea of communicative space allowed me to reveal the subtle process that would help me to transform myself from an outsider into a member of the organization, and insider, and which would help turn *my* research into *our* research.

The concept of communicative space refers to the idea of creating a situation where people have equal freedom and right to express their opinions and wishes, to deliberate about the issues that are most pressing for their practice, and to jointly decide what should be researched and how this should be done. According to Kemmis, communicative space “is constituted as issues or problems are opened up for discussion, and when participants experience their interaction as fostering the democratic expression of diverse views...(permitting) people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do...” (2001: 100).

The idea of communicative space is to a large extent grounded on Jürgen Habermas’ critical theory and theory of communicative action. In his work, Habermas is concerned with peoples’ interaction and the effective coordination of their action and orientations (Baxter, 1987). He also observes that the point of departure of a discussion is usually the differences amongst individuals, which they try to overcome through mutual understanding and consensus.

According to this view, a discussion should include an ongoing critical discourse, as well as explicit validity claims that can help participants “understand the framework through which communicative exchanges may be mutually judged and understood” (Gayá Wicks & Reason, 2009: 245). Consequently, it is through a collaborative and communicative discussion that humans can forge the social norms that guide common life.

The idea of communicative action is central to action research because it involves creating an arena where interpersonal needs can be expressed and where social contexts can be developed in order to meet or frustrate those needs. If these interpersonal needs are properly met, social interaction is likely to result in task accomplishment; if not, individuals in the group might become disappointed or anxious. Accordingly, opening up communicative space in action research is important because it helps researchers to be critically aware and attentive of the obstacles that can prevent dialogue and the realization of action research as an emancipatory endeavor that strives for social action and egalitarian participation (Hyland, 2009).

During my experience with Oxfam, I confirmed that opening up communicative space is specially challenging in second- and third-person action research inquiry, as this kind of research deals precisely with communication among persons and within communities. In the particular case of co-operative inquiry, the expectation is that, as the inquiry process evolves, the group will become more *conversational* and its members more engaged with the life-world of those involved in the inquiry.

In my review of the literature, I found that there is no particular formula for opening and sustaining communicative space. As a matter of fact, communicative spaces can be more or less

formalized and are not always located where the formal spaces of inquiry and action are. They might emerge in different ways from one situation to another and their success will depend on a number of context-depending factors. For this reason, communicative spaces should not be treated as a totality; rather, they should be regarded as an opportunity that can be shaped in multiple ways through the dynamics of human interaction (Hyland, 2009).

Looking back at my first weeks at Oxfam Novib, I realized that my own way of starting to enact communicative action had been by means of getting practitioners to interrupt their daily activities in order to explore the dynamics and worth of their practice with me. Reading about my conversations with the Private Sector Team, I was able to recognize three issues that were crucial in opening communicative space with and within Oxfam Novib, namely:

- i. Positioning myself as a researcher and taking an attitude of inquiry.
- ii. Typifying Oxfam as an organization and engaging with practitioners.
- iii. Looking for convergences in the research definition.

10. Positioning myself as a researcher

On Monday 14 June 2010, I joined Oxfam Novib to perform action research together with the Private Sector Team. On my first day, I arrived at 9:30 am and met with the Private Sector Program Coordinator. She welcomed me enthusiastically and took me to the canteen to have a cup of coffee while she explained a few details about the organization and my activities for the week. She began by telling that the Private Sector Team was composed by a group of people working in different departments at Oxfam Novib: campaigns, programs, lobby, and research and development.

The Private Sector Program, she explained, was a transversal working group managed by a matrix management structure. To help me understand better what every member of the Team did and their interaction, she drew a table on a piece of orange paper with the names of the different departments and people. The table looked something like this:

Campaigns	Development Programs	Advocacy	Research & Development
Wouter (Marketing and Fundraising)	Leo (South-East Asia; Aquaculture)	Johan (Palm Oil, Textiles, Gas and Construction; Smallholders; Dispute Settlement)	Gine (Research; Cocoa and Aquaculture)
	Rudolf (West Africa; Cocoa)	Frank (Latin American; Cocoa, Coffee, Tea; GROW Campaign; Behind the Brands Campaign)	Frank (Financial Sector)
	Koos (Latin America; Soy and Biofuels)	Peter (Financial Sector; Fair Banking Guide; Green Santa Campaign)	
	Derk (South-East Asia; Soy; BRIC Countries; Human Rights)	Sander (OECD; European Union and Dutch Government)	
		Madelon (Food Policy; Soy; Aquaculture; Biofuels)	
		Joyce (Oxfam International Private Sector Leader)	

FIGURE 2: OXFAM NOVIB PRIVATE SECTOR PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The Coordinator next explained her role as coordinator of the Private Sector Program and her responsibility towards the research project that we were about to formally begin. In doing so, she let me know that I could always approach her to talk about the progress of my research, as well

as whatever difficulties I might encounter in the organization or with any of its members. With this gesture, the Coordinator made me feel part of the Private Sector Team, ensuring also that I did not feel lost within Oxfam Novib's intricate organizational structure.

Additionally, she asked me to meet with her on Monday every fortnight to discuss the progress of my work and my impressions. These were two of the first signs that marked the opening up of communication between us. The former laid the foundations for the trustful and honest relationship that would gradually emerge between us, while the latter formalized a space where we could sustain regular communication.

Next during the introductory meeting, the Coordinator of the Private Sector Program informed me that I would not have my own working space, but that I would be *flexing*. This meant that I would not have my own desk. Instead, I would need to find a place to work every day. If the owner of the desk needed it, I would then need to move and find another free space. Initially, this arrangement did not seem ideal to me but, with time, it became a good way to meet people from the different departments.

Our meeting ended with the Coordinator suggesting that I asked the Team assistant to help me arrange one-to-one introductory meetings with each member of the Private Sector Team. In previous days, she had already given them a little information about the research project and our arrangement. Now, it was up to me to get them involved.

Searching for my place at Oxfam Novib

After the introductory meeting with the Private Sector Coordinator, I sat at somebody's desk, logged on into the computer, and tried to find my way around Oxfam's intranet and its information and knowledge management systems. Not too long later, the owner of the desk came and reclaimed his territory. Feeling a little like an intruder, I picked up my things and moved on to find another desk.

Once I found a place, I took a few minutes to let everything sink in. I felt a little overwhelmed; I had not expected to find 330 people working at Oxfam Novib and not have a place of my own. How was I supposed to carve a *space* – in the broader sense of the word – for myself in the organization if I had to take over other people's desks? What if they found my presence annoying instead of helpful?

I opted to put this worries to rest by following the Coordinator's advice and arrange appointments with the people that I would be working with, so that they would get to know me as soon as possible. Hopefully this would help me to find my way around the organization. I sent out a few emails requesting date and time for meetings, and spent the rest of the day reading general documents about Oxfam and working on my research journal.

In the back of my head, however, I continued to think about my immersion in the organization and the role that I would play in the research process. I did not fully know how I was going to approach the situation, but I estimated that it would most likely demand striking a balance between taking active part in the Private Sector Team's tasks and focusing on my own work.

Later that day, I found out that the next day I would have the opportunity to meet everyone in the Private Sector Team. Every other Tuesday, the Team met for two hours in the morning to review the progress of different projects and to make important decisions about strategy and action.

As I got on the train to go back to Utrecht, I began thinking about next day: What I would say about me during the meeting? What was the best way to present the research project? Would I manage

to properly introduce the idea of *us* working as co-researchers and co-subjects? This meeting would be instrumental in opening communicative space with the rest of the team. The Private Sector Coordinator and I had already established the foundation for our interaction and we both had a positive attitude towards working together. Now, I needed to get the rest of the team to join us.

At the beginning of the Private Sector Team meeting, I was introduced by the Coordinator of the Program to the rest of the team and was asked to give a brief explanation about the research activities that I would be carrying out at Oxfam Novib. Already aware of what taking an attitude to research meant, I focused my brief presentation on my role within Oxfam Novib as a researcher and the strengths that I had to offer, as well as explaining the role that they, as practitioners with extensive experience, played in the project.

Then, I went on to explain that I already had some ideas of how the project could be carried out and that I looked forward to discussing and adapting them to better fit the needs of their practice. Lastly, I used the moment to let them know that I was eager to have a more detailed one-to-one discussion with each of them about their work and the ways in which we could work together.

Taking an attitude of inquiry was a process that began at that point, and which became reinforced every time I explained my research to somebody for the first time. In the next days, I met individually with six members of the Private Sector Program to talk about my position within the organization and the content of the research project. Each conversation lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in a relatively informal manner. After the usual preambles, I explained what the focus of the research proposal was – a focus on the articulation of a rights-based approach to development into private sector intervention strategies and its application in different situations – and asked for their input and feedback.

In these conversations, I was careful to show enthusiasm about the topic. I also made clear that the research project was still being developed and that it could be adapted to best fit their research needs. My objective here was to obtain an honest opinion from practitioners, while drawing on their experience to better approach the issue. In a second moment of our conversation, I asked them to tell me about any research needs or ideas they had, including those that were not related to the topics we had previously discussed.

With this, I hoped to identify general research interests and needs, which could later be undertaken in my research. By incorporating some of their suggestions into the overall proposal I would be able to get them more readily involved and ensure ownership of the project. In this way, I hoped that *my* research would become *our* research.

In general, I dedicated my first weeks at Oxfam Novib to strengthening my presence as a researcher in the organization as whole, and the Private Sector Team in particular. Finding common ground with practitioners, creating a sense of shared purpose, and building trust were key aspects at this point to the engagement.

11. Understanding Oxfam International as a confederation

On my fourth week at Oxfam Novib, I was invited to attend a face-to-face meeting with members of the global Private Sector Team. Members from other Oxfam affiliates, including Australia, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and United States met in The Hague for a couple of days to discuss a range of topics related to Oxfam's work with the private sector.

The agenda of the face-to-face meeting included the following:

- Overview of Oxfam's private sector work and private sector resources by affiliate.
- Ways of working on the private sector across the confederation and in countries.
- Oxfam's work on financial transparency as part of the Essential Services Campaign.
- Private sector power analysis for the Economic Justice Campaign and taking forward the private sector work in the Campaign.
- Oxfam's work regarding supermarkets and retail.
- The Oxfam International Poverty Footprint tool and how to use it in the future.
- Oxfam's participation in Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs).
- Oxfam's work on corporate accountability (including business and human rights, OECD Multinational Guidelines).

For two days, I met and exchanged ideas with members of other Oxfam affiliates. This helped me to get into the Oxfam mentality and jargon. Overall, I was mostly surprised by the differences that existed between affiliates in terms of size, strategy, approach, and resources. Nonetheless, it was these differences that made me aware of the implications of being part of an NGO confederation. In general terms, an NGO confederation is a network of like-minded organizations that operate under one common strategy, yet have sufficient independence to act according to their particular context.

Specifically, Oxfam International is a confederation of 14 member organizations formed in 1995 by a group of independent nongovernmental organizations based in Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Ireland, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Quebec, Spain and the United States. The first Oxfam was founded in Britain in 1942 under the name of 'Oxford Committee for Famine Relief' and it campaigned for food supplies to be sent to starving people in occupied Greece during the Second World War.

Since then, Oxfam has become a world leader in delivering emergency relief and implementing long-term development programs in vulnerable communities. The confederation works with more than 3,000 local partner organizations and is part of a global movement that aims to put an end to poverty and injustice.

In Oxfam, the strategic choice of working on corporate social responsibility aspects was decided in 2003 and it impacted the strategy of the whole organization. Since then, collaboration with the private sector has pushed Oxfam to continuously develop and experiment with new models of approaching businesses. In 2005, Oxfam International formulated the *Propositional statement on*

the Role of the Private Sector in Poverty Reduction, as well as a set of working principles that guide the approach of the Oxfam confederation towards the corporations.

Since then, Oxfam Novib has progressively shifted from a pragmatic, pilot-like, and best practice approach towards a more strategic and targeted one. Oxfam's interventions are designed based on the belief that all societal actors, including the private sector, have a role to play in improving the social and environmental conditions of society.

Oxfam Novib's private sector work is implemented simultaneously through four different approaches:

- Corporate advocacy, targeting businesses through public pressure, sector-wide proposals (multi-stakeholder initiatives), and the development of sustainability standards for mainstream markets.
- Government advocacy, building alliances, lobby capacity, and policy development to promote stronger and more innovative policies and international rules.
- Organized action, alliance building and support of civil society organizations and movements.
- Popular campaigning and communications, developing and implementing communication strategies to challenge myths and change beliefs.

Oxfam Novib believes that businesses can make a commitment to reconcile their core business values with sustainable development practices at the work place and within the society where it operates. In this regard, the idea of *sustainable business practices* helps to ensure that business standards are based on integrity, sound principles, and a long-term perspective. Sustainable practices have been made operational in voluntary codes and guidelines that promote employment standards, sourcing of raw materials, environmental care, respect for local cultures, and transparency in business operations, etc.

In terms of sustainable business practices, Oxfam Novib has witnessed a gradual shift from pioneer initiatives carried out by a reduced number of frontrunner companies to a more mainstream approach involving whole sectors and their global value chains. These developments have facilitated the emergence of sector-wide sustainability initiatives, partnerships, and roundtables with collaboration from multiple stakeholders.

With regards to the agri-food sector, Oxfam Novib uses a value chain approach towards preventing that businesses and economic elites abuse their corporate powers to control the global food system, affecting the environment and people living in poverty.

In an attempt to design and implement better regulation, Oxfam Novib has for long been invited to participate in the creation of international sustainability certification schemes for agri-food products along with other stakeholders. For this purpose, Oxfam Novib developed a *Framework for Engagement in Multi-stakeholder Initiatives* that captures the different strategies and key assumptions that might be addressed by these types of initiatives. The document also serves to evaluate the risks and potentials of Oxfam's participation in such platforms.

In terms of its vision about the private sector, Oxfam Novib departs from the view that most companies are neither entirely good nor bad. Their performance has several dimensions, and their motives to perform more or less responsibly can be driven by a strong and sound business case for sustainability. Ultimately, this is what motivates them to change their practices.

Private Sector interventions across Oxfam affiliates

During the exchange in the Private Sector face-to-face meeting, it became evident that Oxfam's private sector work is not equally developed across the confederation. The basis for private sector engagement was laid in 2002 in a document entitled *Propositional Statement on the Corporate Sector*. Here, Oxfam International stated a vision in which the private sector operated on the basis of well managed markets, while promoting empowerment, environmental protection, and better working conditions to help poor people attain a sustainable livelihood. Also in 2002, there was another document published, the *Strategy for Policy Coherence on Relations with the Corporate Sector*, which outlined the basic guidelines and code of conduct for engagement with companies.

Despite having these guidelines, Oxfam affiliates were still struggling to find a coordinated and coherent approach, both at the national and international level. While consensus at the conceptual level appeared to be clear, the design and execution of private sector interventions across the confederation seemed less straightforward. There seemed to be important gaps at least in two main regards: the first had to do with gaps between the conceptual and the practical definitions in the private sector strategy, and the second was related to the deployment of private sector interventions across affiliates.

The first person to present during the meeting was a representative of Oxfam Novib, the Dutch affiliate. Oxfam Novib, she explained, views the private sector as a constructive force that contributes to economic growth and job creation, occasionally undermining development by accelerating environmental degradation and misusing labor. Oxfam Novib views the lack of regulation and its enforcement as a problem and considers corporate responsibility as a potential concept to ensure that the private sector has a more positive impact on development. The different approaches that Oxfam Novib takes in its engagement with the private sector include influencing the creation/improvement of regulatory frameworks, critical advocacy, advocacy based on dialogue, partnerships with businesses, and fundraising.

Oxfam Novib operates within a set of working principles that set guidelines for engaging and interacting with the private sector, as well as good practice standards and procedures. These principles are contained in a set of documents and guide private sector work across the organization. One of the most widely used documents in this regard is the *Ethical Screening Guidelines*, a framework used to evaluate the risks and returns of engaging with the private sector. The *Ethical Screening Guidelines* includes two stages; the first evaluates a company, while the second assesses the type of engagement that is most suitable.

Novib's representative called on all affiliates to use and share the *Guidelines* in order to protect Oxfam's brand and international reputation, as well as to avoid inconsistent practices across the confederation. She also argued for shifting from a reactive approach towards a more proactive one, for instance, by agreeing on which sectors to target at the international level.

Oxfam Great Britain's approach to the private sector is driven by Oxfam's international strategy and focuses on sectors that have impacts on agriculture, finance, and climate change. With regards to agriculture, Oxfam Great Britain works on issues related to sustainable production, vulnerability and risk, food security, access to markets, gender, and labor. Regarding the financial sector and climate change, it works on microfinance and climate finance. Delegates of Oxfam Great Britain mostly focused their intervention on questioning how the social impacts of companies could be measured and discussing the type of benchmarks that could be used to evaluate Oxfam's private sector work.

In the presentation, I also learned that Oxfam Australia does not have a team specifically dedicated to private sector work. Instead, it has approximately five people that work on issues related to the private sector in the mining and financial sectors, where Oxfam Australia targets

companies and funds that invest in mining operations. Additionally, Oxfam Australia has a dams and hydropower program and is also involved with the garment and sportswear industry. In general terms, involvement with the private sector is relatively recent for Oxfam Australia, with it increasing in the last five to eight years, and continuing to grow, particularly on issues related to food security and climate change.

On the contrary, Oxfam Belgium has a more limited corporate advocacy capacity than other Oxfam affiliates because in Belgium Oxfam operates as three different organizations: *Solidarité* for campaigning, and two others that deal with Fair Trade and the Wereldwinkels (shops that sell items produced by small producers around the world). Accordingly, in Belgium, Oxfam's interaction with the private sector is mostly based on the procurement of sustainable products, advocacy for more egalitarian purchasing and investment policies, and making production chains fairer. Currently, it promotes more decent working and regulation conditions in the cocoa and biofuels sectors by means of improving Belgian corporate accountability law, as well as motivating export credit agencies to adhere to binding labor and environmental rights.

In France, Oxfam has 20 staff members in total and thus limited capacity to work with the private sector. Yet, Oxfam France is active on issues related to economic justice, in addition to work on agriculture and climate change, as well as the conflict in the arms sector. The brand *Oxfam* is not recognized in France as it is in other countries; in fact, only three per cent of the French population has heard of it, its representatives explained.

Intermón Oxfam, the Spanish affiliate, has developed private sector work around the issues of transparency in the extractives, tourism, and garments sectors. It also has a more limited capacity, as there are only four full-time people working in the private sector team. Conversely, Oxfam America has seven people working full-time on private sector-related interventions and is planning to grow twice the size in the coming years.

Oxfam America is engaged in five areas of work including corporate engagement, corporate advocacy, partnership and collaboration, measurement and disclosure, and multi-stakeholder initiatives. Mainly, it works on aspects related to agriculture, business and human rights, pharmaceuticals, revenue transparency, and the development of poverty footprints.

In terms of the human rights and business discussion, Oxfam America and Oxfam Australia have been particularly active. Oxfam Australia, for instance, was involved with the revision of the OECD guidelines on this topic, while Oxfam America participated in the development of the *Principles on Businesses and Human Rights* (see (Ruggie, 2008)). Since 2000, Oxfam Novib was also involved in this topic, supporting OECD Watch, a group dedicated to issues related to corporate accountability.

In general, various Oxfam affiliates had been active in this topic either through the OECD or other instruments like the Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, the Equator Principles, ISO 26000, etc.

In light of the revision of the OECD guidelines in 2010, and the publication of Ruggie's Guidelines, Oxfam affiliates agreed to take a critical position towards these instruments arguing that the position of human rights in the corporate accountability debate needed to be strengthened. Oxfam affiliates recognized that these instruments would bring some encouraging signs to the business and human rights debate, particularly in terms of making the impact of business operations much clearer, as well as the consequences for those companies affecting the environment in which they operate.

Oxfam America was directly involved in the OECD process, participating in working groups in the United States and directly collaborating with John Ruggie. However, it had not taken a formal

position with regards to the framework and guidelines. Oxfam American recognized that while there were questions that needed to be answered regarding issues of extra territoriality, conflict zones, and the meaning of the concept of due diligence; Ruggie had managed to build a robust framework from previously dispersed information, making important progress in framing the terms of the debate.

Each affiliate in the Oxfam Confederation has its own capacity, resources, and approach towards engaging with businesses. Within the confederation, it is Oxfam Novib that has the most expertise and resources dedicated to private sector interventions.

12.

Looking for convergences in the research task definition

Even if our motivations were different, since my first days at Oxfam Novib I was able to link the discussions at Oxfam Novib to the research interests of MUNPOP. Both groups wondered about the increased interaction between public and private actors, together with the responsibilities that each group bore in solving the sustainability challenges of the global agri-food system.

In a sense, the basis for my inquiry already existed. All I needed to do was to let the flow of the inquiry move in the direction of some specific aspects of Oxfam's Private Sector practice. For instance, as I engaged in formal and informal conversations with practitioners, the relevance of understanding the implications of taking a rights-based approach in Oxfam Novib's work with the private sector became more and more apparent. People began expressing the importance of having a common and more sophisticated understanding of how rights-based approaches looked in reality.

An anecdote can best help to capture this. Around my sixth week at Oxfam Novib, one day I was sharing an office with a woman whom I had not met before. At some point during the day, she saw me reading an article about rights-based approaches and she began sharing with me insights about what this meant for her in her daily practice. Without me having said any specifics about my research, she told me that Oxfam needed to get a better grip on the concept because everybody used it differently. Each interpretation made sense to a person and was not wrong, but it occasionally conflicted with the interpretations of other people and organizations.

When I mentioned that these issues were at the heart of my research, she asked me whether it had been a coincidence that I was asking the same questions, or if I had come to them because of my interaction with people at Oxfam Novib. At that moment, I confirmed that it takes more than a literature review and a coincidence to find where the knowledge/practice gap is. In fact, it takes plenty of time and a lot of conversations – formal and informal – to uncover what people are worried about, what they do not know, or what they want to know.

After a few months of dialogue and some weeks of direct collaboration with Oxfam, the definition of my task and the way to go about it were becoming clearer to me and to the practitioners involved in the research. From different conversations, emails, meetings, and documents that I had reviewed at Oxfam Novib, I was able to confirm that questions on the practical application of rights-based approaches and their articulation in different private sector intervention strategies, were questions that quite a few people had in mind.

From the passage above, it is easy to see how the existence of converging interests between practitioners and the researcher contributed to opening communicative space among us. As practitioners increasingly understood my role, they became more willing to take part in the project because it resonated with their practice in a way that they could recognize the value that it would bring to their work, and to the organization as a whole. It was this weaving of mutual interests that eventually led us to define the research questions of the different parts of this project.

A research-oriented organization

From the first conversations that I had with practitioners at Oxfam Novib, I became aware of the organization being highly research-oriented. In Oxfam, research was a valuable activity for most members. People followed pertinent sources of information such as newsletters, newspapers, research journals, magazines, and blogs and shared information among colleagues. They were aware of the value of information and the effort it takes to collect it.

Evidently, this became quite beneficial for me since I did not have to convince anybody of the relevance of research for their practice. Already at the initial stages of the project, I got the impression that it would be relatively easy to get practitioners engaged. For instance, the fact that Oxfam Novib was used to designing their programs and interventions based on relevant research, made my task easier and much more enjoyable. Most people that I talked to in Oxfam were positive about the pertinence of research and showed great enthusiasm to collaborate in my project.

Additionally, the flat hierarchical structure and open-door policy of the organization allowed for information to circulate freely among and across departments. This had a direct influence in the way I engaged with practitioners and opened communicative space. Even though people were often busy, I always found ways to talk to them whether it was in the corridor, by the coffee machine, or just by popping into their office. It was in this interruption of their daily chores, that practitioners began to share with me and explore the nature, dynamics, and worth of their practice.

Already in my first exchanges with practitioners, I was also able to notice how critical and self-reflective they were. They showed great concern for the relevance and impacts of their work and continuously raised critical questions about their practice. This situation further facilitated my role within the organization, as there already existed a disposition towards knowing more and being better. What I needed to do was to direct the existing energy and curiosity towards my project.

As often as it was possible, I took on board the questions posed by practitioners and looked into the issues that most affected their practice. I addressed some of their queries through my research and others in my daily involvement with the organization. By taking advantage of the organizational culture, I was able to open and sustain communicative space with practitioners making a relatively small effort. The fact that Oxfam Novib was a research-oriented and self-reflective organization facilitated my activities without a doubt.

Oxfam and human rights: How old research informs new research

During a Private Sector Team meeting, somebody suggested that I talked to a woman who had been an intern at Oxfam Novib in 2009 and had written a thesis about the rights-based conceptualizations within the organization. I was fortunate to hear that she was back at Oxfam Novib working on a temporary project, so I contacted her asking if we could meet to discuss our research projects. When we met a couple of days later, she was incredibly helpful and eager to share the insights that she had gathered during her research.

Her research project departed from the observation that many development organizations had adopted a rights-based approach in the last decade, either as a reaction to the lack of success of other approaches to deliver what they promised, or as a means to use human rights principles to make more robust development interventions. In her report, she observed a lack of consensus and little agreement on what rights-based approaches actually meant, as they remained open for interpretation, both at the institutional and personal level.

Even though there were many fundamental questions related to the emergence and relevance of rights-based approaches to development – for instance, about whether rights-based approaches are a passing trend or a powerful discourse, the expectations that they create, or their operational challenges – her research was confined to considering how rights-based approaches were viewed, perceived, and experienced within a single organization: Oxfam Novib.

The starting point of the project was the intuition that, within NGOs, the effects of certain reflexive practices and institutional processes on the practice of rights-based approaches are often underestimated. The main question of her project dealt with the ways in which organizational and operational factors, as well as the wider development context, influenced the basic understandings that people had of rights-based approaches. To carry out her research, she combined desk research and field work with a six-month internship within the Research and Development department at Oxfam Novib.

In few words, her research focused on how concerns with knowledge, resources, status, function, and politics influenced the adoption (or non-adoption) of rights-based approaches. In her results, she found that their practical application was still widely contested within Oxfam Novib. This was understood to be a consequence of the wide interpretation that existed within the organization about the relation between human rights and development.

Furthermore, the study found that the divergent interpretations of what taking a rights-based approach meant were shaped according to two factors. First, they were shaped by the function that each person performed in the organization. And second, by a general confusion that existed between the ideas of drawing on human rights to achieve development, and funding development projects aimed at protecting human rights. In general, rights-based approaches were largely perceived as an ideal that could not be easily translated into practice, measured, or evaluated.

In order to illustrate the ways in which different actors within Oxfam Novib perceived rights-based approaches, she elaborated a typology including the different understandings that she found. The table below is replicated from her thesis. It shows five categories of perceptions, their characteristics, the organizational department where they were found to exist, and how such perceptions became revealed.

RBA approaches	Characteristics (What)	Found where (Who)	Identified reasons (Why)	Revealed by (How)
5.2 The Visionaries	Long term Aligned with OI Aligned with government Philosophical Visionary	Management Staff bureaux	Inspirational Knowledge Function (leadership)	Policies Official communiqués Broad lines, no operational details
5.3 The Oxfam- Aims Segmenters	Aim-4 = RBA RBA not necessarily in other Aims	All levels, particularly Projects and Staff bureaus	Knowledge Resources Function Organizational culture	Organization structure Discourse (official and non- official documents)
5.4 The Pragmatists	Short term Practical Results-oriented Assessment dependent Concrete tools and indicators (present or needed) Adapt to current situation Prioritising needs versus rights	Projects Campaigns Fundraising	Resources Function Accountability Knowledge Incentives Performance	Daily practice Organization structure Discourse Priorities/choices Decision making Measurement tools Concrete explicit language
5.5 The Experienced versus Inexperienced	Not new, have worked like this for years Versus This is a shift from needs based	Particularly Latin America projects, and particularly people working in Aim-4, but also throughout the organization people working longer Versus Other countries than Latin America, other aims than 4, new people	Knowledge (lack thereof) Experience (lack thereof) Function	Discourse (official and non- official documents) Particular situation of institu- tional memory Choices of partners
5.6 The Intuitive Im- plementers	Based on gut-feeling	Anywhere in the organi- zation	Knowledge (Personal background and experi- ence) Resources (lack of tools/guidance)	Discourse (mainly unofficial) Decision making

FIGURE 3: TYPOLOGY OF RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES WITHIN OXFAM NOVIB, REPRODUCED FROM CONIN, 2009.

The conclusions of this research project pointed towards the fact that, because of the different interpretations of rights-based approaches, there was a danger that the concept would become an organizational buzzword. Buzzwords can be sensitizing and thus mobilizing concepts that generate new organizational energy and capacity. Yet, they can also become concepts either loaded with or stripped off meaning, making them easily misinterpreted, misused, and adapted over and over until they mean different things to different people.

The long conversation I had with this researcher was an eye-opener in terms of what practitioners at Oxfam Novib understood for rights-based approaches. To a large extent, the findings of her research corroborated the impressions that I got during my initial conversations with practitioners, confirming the existence of a knowledge/practice gap within the organization.

Some of the literature I consulted on rights-based approaches pointed out that one of the key challenges to making rights-based approaches operational was the need for making internal investments. Such investments serve to ensure that development practitioners are well equipped to incorporate human rights notions into their work, as well as to properly manage the radical organizational changes that are required when adopting a human rights framework (Chapman, 2009).

Evidently, Oxfam Novib had not been the only organization faced with the challenge of creating a common understanding of what rights-based approaches are or what they should look like. A study published by Morago (2003), for instance, also found various interpretations of the concept within ActionAid, another international NGO. In broad strokes, the study discussed the need for exposing the different elements of rights-based approaches and integrating them into analysis and practice.

Similarly, the results and recommendations offered by the thesis research on Oxfam Novib's case pointed towards the need for an improved and mutual understanding of the organizational and practical implications posed by rights-based approaches to development. In this respect, it became clear that my research offered a possibility to *keep the conversation going*. This meant steering and helping to sustain a conversation on the linkage between development and human rights in order to generate new understandings about the practical application of a rights-based approach, specifically in relation to Oxfam Novib's private sector work.

It was around 2003 when Oxfam Novib made its first attempt to build a policy framework linking the concepts of corporate social responsibility and rights-based approach. This policy framework recognized the growing social and environmental concerns caused by increased economic activity; the changing perceptions of the public, where social criteria began influencing investor and consumer decisions; the rising role of the media in shedding light into controversial businesses activities; and the emergence of standardization and regulation by international agencies and private actors (Boahene, 2005).

Since then, Oxfam's Private Sector work has been characterized by a constant linking and reconciling of issues in particular sectors or industries with specific development imperatives and human rights principles. Specially, the agri-food sector has become an important target of Oxfam's private sector work in the last years.

Oxfam and the agri-food sector: Identifying a campaign target

In the period 2011 - 2015, Oxfam International's work largely centered on pursuing economic justice with a particular focus on the issue of food justice. Under this umbrella concept, a number of ambitious campaigns, *GROW* and *Behind the Brands* in particular, targeted the private sector,

demanding more responsible sourcing and producing practices from the largest multinational companies in the world.

GROW is a public campaign that aims to explain the interconnection between food and oil prices, decreasing agricultural yields and climate change, gender inequality and land grabs. It focuses on shedding light on dysfunctional commodity markets and the social and environmental impacts they have on people and communities. The campaign works to improve three primary aspects of food security: climate change, by calling on governments and big businesses to cut emissions; land grabs by ensuring transparent deals and fair compensation; and small-scale farming, by providing farmers with sustainable techniques and securing access to natural resources (see Oxfam International, 2014b).

Further, *Behind the Brands* also falls within the scope of *GROW*. It is a rating system that assesses the agricultural sourcing policies of the ten largest food and beverage brands around the world. The Scorecard system evaluates corporate performance across seven themes, including, transparency, women, workers, farmers, land, water, and climate (see Oxfam International, 2014a). In the context of private sector work, the main components of these initiatives involve assessing corporate performance against key standards, engaging with customers and providing them with relevant information, and encouraging a race to the top to improve private sector policies.

Increasingly, the private sector has become a primary component of these type of public campaigns, highlighting the position of private firms in the global agricultural system. Oxfam Novib acknowledges the harmful impacts of the private sector, especially upon poor communities and disenfranchised groups, through its sourcing, contracting, and investing practices. Yet, it simultaneously recognizes the constructive role that businesses can play in building smallholders' capacity, providing new technologies and services where there is little public investment or capacity, and speaking out against harmful policies.

Oxfam's campaigns on food justice focused on a number of agricultural commodities. In particular, sectors that provided evidence of the social and environmental impacts of an unbalanced agri-food system, like palm oil and soy; as well as, those that employed a large number of smallholders, such as cocoa and farmed shrimps, were chosen as focus of the campaigns. Oxfam's *Economic Justice Operational Plan*, dated 2011, declared that not only consumer-facing businesses would be campaign targets, but all stakeholders in food production and consumption, including farmers and rural communities, national authorities, international institutions, and consumers.

13. Sketching a research plan

Once I had managed to delineate the issues that were important to Oxfam Novib, as well to conceptualize them from a more theoretical perspective, I was able to establish a general research plan. The idea here was that this research plan would serve as a roadmap to guide the research process, while graphically showing to practitioners the issues and sectors that would be explored. By putting the concerns, ideas, and questions that practitioners had previously shared with me up on the wall, I hoped to ignite a sense of ownership of the project and to ensure their commitment towards solving the questions that we had jointly defined.

In general terms, the research plan established a number of core elements (in grey), which included the different private sector intervention strategies, a number of priority sectors, and three aspects that we deemed critical parts of the research. The idea was that the different intervention strategies and sectors would be analyzed from the perspectives of private regulation and multi-stakeholder arrangements, as well as the operationalization of rights-based principles in the context of NGO-business engagement.

All research efforts would be geared towards accomplishing three research objectives (in orange). For each of these objectives, a justification, method, and analytical approach (in green) were given in order to provide some reference about why and how the data and empirical evidence would be analyzed.

Furthermore, the sketching of a research plan represented a clear transition from propositional and experiential knowing to presentational knowing. When I began elaborating the diagram above, I became aware of how each of its components had come to light. Most of them had largely emerged as a consequence of my face-to-face encounters with practitioners at Oxfam Novib and with my supervisors. But, the review of scientific literature had also had an important role to play.

The propositional and experiential forms of knowing that I had accumulated along seven months could now be translated into a presentational form of knowing in the shape of a diagram. This exercise constituted one of the first tangible outcomes that I presented to practitioners, providing a concrete expression of the elements that made up the project.

A few days later, I met with my supervisor at Utrecht University to discuss my first experiences at Oxfam Novib and the progress of my research journal. When we got into the research plan, I explained that I had elaborated that diagram as a way of visually connecting the elements of the research that I had in my head. My supervisor told me that it was a good first attempt to establish the different phases and components of my research, conveying a potentially powerful story.

At that moment, I found this last part particularly interesting, as sometimes I found it hard to explain what my research project was about in a clear and comprehensive way. In addition to drawing diagrams, telling about my project to different people and at different stages of the process, also proved to be a very useful way of explaining my empirical observations and connecting them to academic research. Stories, or narratives, also constitute a presentational form of knowing.

During our meeting, my supervisor and I agreed that this diagram would be an excellent guide for discussing the next research actions with Oxfam Novib practitioners. I expected that the next cycle of action would likely deal with becoming more familiar with the cases included in the research – aquaculture, cocoa, palm oil, and soy – as well as with drafting a more detailed plan of how the first objective of the inquiry would be achieved.

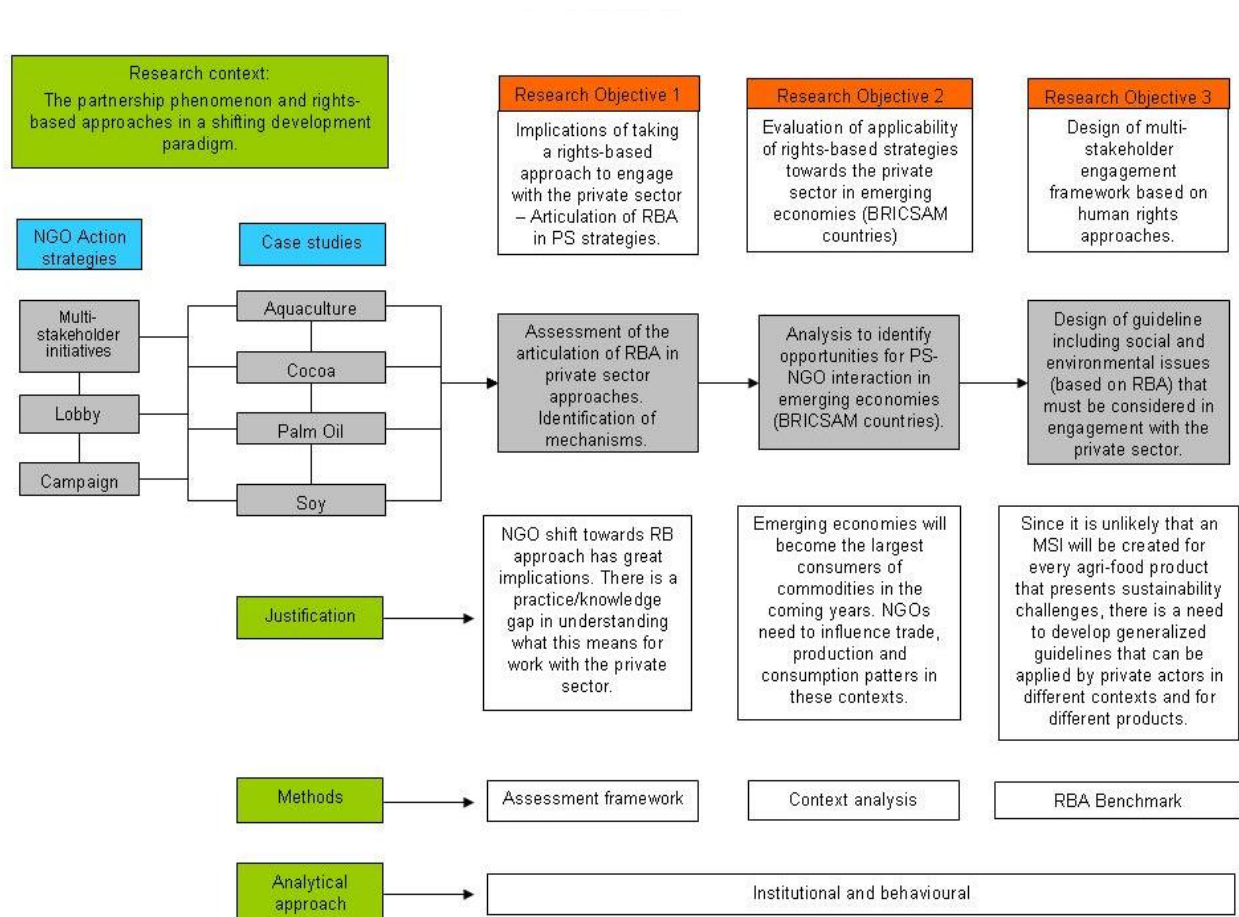


FIGURE 4: RESEARCH PLAN AS OF AUGUST 2010

14. Reflecting on some methodological aspects

Having spent some weeks at Oxfam, I confirmed that action research offered great potential for reaping the benefits of interacting with the Private Sector Team. But even if I was convinced that this was an appropriate way to carry out the research, I occasionally found myself questioning the robustness of the approach, as well as fearing criticisms from colleagues in academia. To put my worries to rest, I decided to take a closer look into the elements that ensured the validity and legitimacy of action research. This way, I could incorporate them from the early stages of the research process.

Whereas in conventional social science validity is most often secured by following methodological rules, in action research validity is secured by ensuring that the knowledge generated is strong and credible enough to act on it. In this sense, the validity of action research relies on providing detailed descriptions of the arguments and processes that make up the inquiry and reveal the credibility of its results (Checkland & Holwell, 1998; Knutstad, Rolfsen, & Johnsen, 2007; Rod et al., 2002).

Since action research is dependent on the conjugation of action, reflection, and the co-generation of new knowledge, narratives are central to it. Telling a story is fundamental to doing science, even if it is occasionally viewed by conventional social scientists as “unsystematic and atheoretical” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007: 62). Powerful narratives are central to securing validity in action research, for validity is dynamic and processual.

In this regard, it is John Heron (1996; 2009) who has placed most emphasis on these questions. In his view, researchers should develop a number of inquiry skills and validity procedures to improve the quality of knowing, namely:

- a. *Research cycling*: cooperative inquiry involves going through the four phases of inquiry several times, cycling between action and reflection, looking at experience from different angles, developing different ideas, and trying different ways of behaving. Research cycling can be convergent, in which case the co-researchers look several times at the same issue in more or less detail; or it can be divergent, as co-researchers decide to look at different issues on successive cycles. Many variations of convergence and divergence are possible in the course of an inquiry. It is up to the group to decide which one is appropriate at each point of the research.
- b. *Balance of action and reflection*: researchers and practitioners must allocate the appropriate time to act and reflect. Reflection might be more important during the early stages of the process, as practitioners and researchers gather experience, but also in the latter stages to analyze different actions and their consequences. The inquiry group will need to find its own balance between action and reflection, depending on the topic being explored.
- c. *Developing critical attention*: co-researchers need to look at their experience with curiosity. They need to detach from their practice so that they can look at it critically. And the process of research cycling helps people develop this ability. As the group matures, it may be helpful to use constructive challenges in order to increase people’s critical attention.

- d. *Authentic collaboration*: members of a co-operative inquiry group must develop ways of working which are collaborative; preventing that one or two people dominate the group and that other voices are excluded. However, people might have different roles and responsibilities, as long as equal contribution within a group is ensured. For this purpose, it might be useful to rotate leadership and to have regular review periods where all group members can express their experience and their impressions about the way the group is working.
- e. *Dealing with distress*: it is likely that along the process co-researchers will examine their experience and their lives, uncovering things they have been avoiding looking at and aspects of their life with which they are uncomfortable. The group must also be ready to deal with emotional distress openly and to provide a space for this to happen.
- f. *Chaos and order*: co-operative inquiry is an orderly process that takes into account the experience generated in one cycle and applies it to the next. Yet, co-operative inquiry is also about intuitive discovery, happenstance and synchronicity. Inquiry groups must find a balance between chaos and order. The key issue here is to be prepared for chaos, to be able to tolerate it and go with the confusion until there is a sense of creative resolution.

The practice of these skills and procedures, along with what Heron (1996) calls *critical subjectivity*, prevents people from fooling themselves about their experience and allows them to be critical about their claims of knowing. Critical subjectivity means that people use their personal, living knowledge in the search for objectivity, being able to build and develop it.

Lastly, one of the main challenges in action research refers to securing external credibility. External credibility refers to the capacity to produce knowledge and results that are convincing to someone who did not participate in the research process. In this respect, defining a triangulation strategy to verify findings and interpretations is key for securing validity in action research.

In the case of my project, the triangulation of methods and sources used in the research would help to ensure that its results could be tested and verified in a number of ways. Further, my frequent exchanges with practitioners and my supervisors, the revision of my research journal by both groups, and their continued engagement also helped to appease my concerns about securing external credibility.

15. Concluding thoughts

This part of the book has been dedicated to narrating the early stages of engagement between the practitioners and myself. In this case, establishing contact and opening up communicative space was not particularly difficult. However, this does not mean that it was easy either. During my experience with Oxfam, I found that not only creating, but sustaining a space where participants can be reflexive and critical of their own practice demands at least three things from the researcher: capacity to listen, empathy, and time.

In order to design a project that is interesting to practitioners, the researcher needs to take time and listen to the needs and interests of the group. Listening does not only take place during interviews or meetings, but also during informal conversations over coffee or lunch. Asking the right questions and probing beyond quick responses requires that the researcher shows empathy towards its co-researchers.

In this sense, seeing my relationship with practitioners unfold was one of the things that interested me the most during my early interaction at Oxfam Novib. Within a couple of months, practitioners had become used to my presence and interacted with me in a natural way, asking my opinion about things and freely sharing information with me. Unfortunately, this familiarity came with a price to pay, for as the research process evolved, I started to get too comfortable in my own position.

Often, when I met with my supervisors, they would need to remind me to step back and engage with practitioners from a more distant, objective position. As I got more and more accustomed to Oxfam's practice and its people, it became easy to lose sight of things that were interesting or insightful from a research perspective. Increasingly, the dilemma of acting as a *friendly outsider* or a *critical insider* became more relevant.

In general terms, I believed that I should opt for the role of the friendly outsider. Members of the Private Sector Team did not show aversion of being criticized at any point during our collaboration. They were interested in learning and improving their practice and, what is more, they were expecting that I would help them do it. Perhaps it was because of this openness towards myself, and the way in which they had welcomed me into the Private Sector Team as one of their own, that I started to become more of a critical insider.

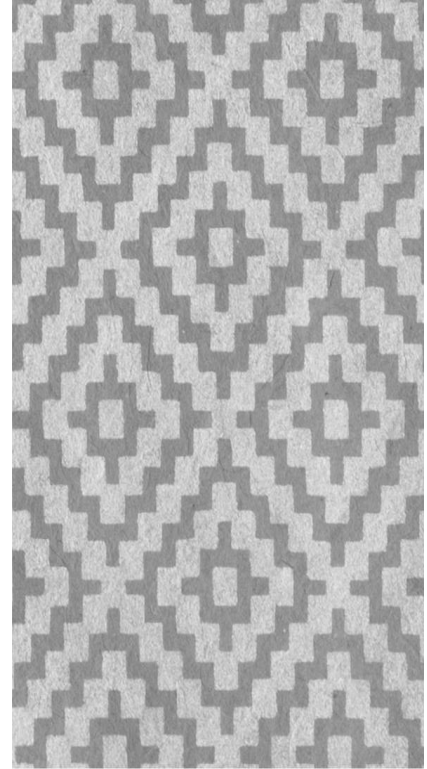
Initially, this did not seem like a problem to me. I was comfortable and I had managed to open a number of communicative spaces with practitioners. However, with time, and particularly as my role within the Private Sector Team became more complex, I discovered that shifting between these two positions would become an important struggle in the research process.

In action research literature, this duality is best captured by the idea of the *continuum of positionality*, which deals with the relationship between insiders and outsiders (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The issue of positionality is important because it determines how researchers frame epistemological, methodological, and ethical issues in the research. Traditionally, it was assumed that the researcher was an outsider, while the group or community in question were the insiders holding a deep level of tacit knowledge. Later, when practitioners also began acting as the initiators of an action research project, the idea of insider research emerged.

In the case of participatory collaborative research, however, delineating the position of the researcher is not as clear-cut. In this type of research, the position of the researcher in relation to the participants can shift or vary at different points in time throughout the collaboration. In this sense, being either an insider or an outsider does not fall in a neat category. Most often, the researcher's position in the continuum is determined by the degree of commitment and reciprocity in the project. Here, commitment has to do with how involved participants are in the research, while reciprocity implies ensuring that every participant gets what she/he wants out from the project.

Approximately after three months of working with the Private Sector Team, I became more aware about the position that I occupied, both in relation to the other participants and the research project itself. In my case, I experienced the insider/outsider tension as a tension between belonging – being part of the group, securing trust, and becoming involved – or remaining on the sidelines – not being one completely part of the world of practice or academia.

Even though eventually I became a little more comfortable with occupying this type of no man's land, the tensions posed by the dichotomy of the insider/outsider position, accompanied me through most of the research project.



PART III

Playing the politics of scale: Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

A shorter version of this part of the book was published in:

Pesqueira L. & P. Glasbergen (2013). Playing the politics of scale: Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, *Geoforum* 45, 296 – 304.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718512002631>

16. Exploring Oxfam's intervention in the palm oil sector

Once I began discussing more formally with practitioners the investigation on the articulation of rights-based approaches in multi-stakeholder initiatives, we concluded that it would be interesting to look at a particular case in-depth in order to really understand the mechanisms or tactics used by Oxfam for this purpose. Once we had agreed to conduct a case study, everyone was quick to suggest the palm oil and cocoa cases.

Oxfam had been active in these sectors for at least a decade and had great interest in assessing their intervention from a human rights perspective. At the time, I was also helping to draft a Background Paper about Oxfam's interventions in the cocoa sector (see Annex A at the end of the book), and was quite familiar with Oxfam's approach in that sector. The palm oil case, however, offered a richer empirical experience as the next meeting of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil was coming up and I would be able to join a small delegation of Oxfam Novib attending the roundtable meeting.

Oil palms are the largest source of vegetable, edible oil. Oil palms produce approximately 34% more than soybeans, rapeseed, and sunflowers. Palm oil production has gained importance in the last years, as it has many competitive advantages over other oils, including its low production cost, high yield, and lack of trans-fatty acids. Oil is produced from the fruit bunches found at the top of the palm, which are pressed and crushed into three products: crude palm oil, palm kernel oil, and palm kernel meal.

Palm oil and palm kernel oil are important ingredients for food production. Palm oil is used in the production of margarine, shortening, ice cream, and non-dairy creamers and whiteners. It is also used to make specialty fats like cocoa butter and substitutes. Moreover, palm oil is used for cooking and frying, especially in South-East Asian and West African countries where oil palms are grown. It also has non-food uses, including direct applications in soaps, candles, resins, inks, detergents, and cosmetics. Around 50% of the products found in a supermarket contain palm oil or one of its derivatives. The biofuel boom of the last years has caused additional expectation around the potential use of palm oil as feedstock in this sector.

Indonesia and Malaysia produce 85% of the global palm oil production. Other countries like Cameroon, Colombia, and Liberia are increasing their production capacity at an alarming speed. Of the almost 50 million tons of palm oil produced in 2010, 15% was traded to India and 14% to China, the two largest and fastest growing markets. The European Union is the third largest importer with 12% of global production, of which Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, France, and Spain consume 80%.

Similarly to palm oil consumption, the production of this commodity oil is also fairly concentrated. Around fifty large plantation groups control 75% of global production. The refining and trading of palm oil is even more concentrated with 15 groups controlling three-quarters of the global market. With respect to end-product manufacturers, the confectionary sector is not as concentrated as the detergents, cosmetics, snacks, and margarines industries where few multinational companies control large market shares.

In the late 1990s, huge scandals regarding the large-scale expansion of palm oil plantations as a cause of accelerating deforestation in Indonesia reached the media and triggered important public campaigns. NGOs and consumer organizations, particularly in the United Kingdom, began mobilizing resources and producing reports which showed how forests were disappearing at an alarming rate – an area equivalent to half of the size of Belgium per year – and how tigers, orangutans, and entire sensitive ecosystems were being driven into extinction.

After this scandal was brought to the public eye, palm oil stakeholders became more and more concerned with the sustainability of the sector as they realized that the problem of deforestation was only the tip of the iceberg. Initiated by WWF and Unilever in 2004, the RSPO was set to bring stakeholders together to create a standard for sustainable palm oil production. In addition to palm oil growers and traders, NGOs were also invited to take part in the process (Nikoloyuk, Bruns, & de Man, 2010; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011).

Oxfam's participation in the RSPO is part of a strategy aimed at having access to powerful stakeholders along the global palm oil chain to change the power dynamics in the sector. Oxfam's participation is guided by the principle of improving communities' position vis-à-vis business stakeholders and investors in the sector, as well as ensuring the protection of the rights of individuals and communities to participation, inclusiveness, accountability, and empowerment. Oxfam's work with the private sector reflects the continuous tensions that exist between economic development and poverty alleviation efforts.

As with many other cases, it has been argued that the production of palm oil has the potential to lift millions of people out of poverty and to bring economic development to farmers in Indonesia, Malaysia, and other palm oil producing countries. The production of palm oil, however, has many negative social and environmental impacts that place additional constraints on palm oil producing communities and their surroundings. For instance, land use changes associated to the production of export commodities increases competition for resources that would otherwise be available for food production.

Oxfam is often faced with the dilemma of finding common pathways towards the creation of equitable international markets and private sector engagement, which remain faithful to its rights-based approach to development. For Oxfam, the fulfilment of human rights takes place at the regional, national, and international levels; but most importantly, in a combination of levels.

For this purpose, Oxfam works to strengthen grassroots organizations at the local level and works to influence international organizations at the global level simultaneously. In this context, Oxfam advocates for both governments and the private sector being subjected to a system of checks and balances, as well as being held accountable for the duties they are obligated to fulfill.

Important to consider is the fact that incorporating human rights principles throughout Oxfam's practice has not been an easy process. Levels of awareness, capacity, and willingness to uphold the standards through programs and campaign cycles has been found to vary across departments and affiliates in the face of other organizational demands (Brouwer et al., 2005).

17.

Gathering evidence from the field: Sustainability challenges of palm oil production

The sustainability challenges associated with palm oil production are broad and varied. As is the case with many agro-commodities, smallholder palm oil producers do not benefit equally from the production of this export crop. Instead of being enriched by the employment opportunities and the macro-economic gains, they continue to become impoverished. Local communities are often displaced from their farming land to make way for large-scale palm oil plantations.

Additionally, the grabbing up of land, natural resources and water by governments and businesses threaten the means, which the livelihoods of local communities depend upon. These expansions threaten natural tropical forests and High Conservation Value Ecosystems, which are some of the most biodiverse places on earth and habitats of many rare and endangered species.

During the month of November 2010, I travelled to Indonesia with a small delegation from Oxfam Novib to conduct a field visit to oil palm plantations and participate in the 8th conference meeting of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. Oxfam had been involved for a few years in a number of initiatives that sought to bring more sustainable practices to the global production of palm oil. In particular, Oxfam Novib had been involved with the Dutch Palm Oil Commodity Platform, a platform in which several Dutch civil society organizations cooperate to reduce the environmental and social problems associated to the production of palm oil, while Oxfam Great Britain had raised concerns about the pressure put on greenhouse emissions and food supply by the increasing demand for biofuels.

But, most importantly, palm oil activities across the Oxfam confederation had been geared towards the creation of new regulatory frameworks; in particular, towards the creation of a voluntary production standard for the global industry in the context of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). So far, Oxfam's participation in the RSPO had been accompanied by a strong advocacy role inside and outside the RSPO, as well as by the formation of more-or-less formal alliances and coalitions with local NGOs and other like-minded organizations.

Visiting palm oil plantations in Borneo, Indonesia

During the trip to Indonesia, our group visited the island of Borneo where we spent a few days in the Province of West Kalimantan. Here, we travelled with a couple of representatives from Sawit Watch, one of Oxfam's local partner organizations, who helped us with translating and interpreting, setting up meetings with community leaders and local NGOs, arranging transport and accommodation, etc. Their knowledge of the territory and the people in the region were incredibly valuable for our trip; without them we could have not accomplished many of our objectives.

I felt grateful for their kindness and the patience with which our guides and partners explained day after day the complexities faced by the local communities of West Kalimantan. West Kalimantan is a particularly interesting area where many controversial developments around palm oil production were taking place: the provincial government had plans to expand oil palm production by more hectares than any other province in the country and this was expected to

increase the number of land conflicts related to oil palm expansion in West Kalimantan, which is only second to the Province of South Sumatra (Sirait, 2009).

During our visit, I had plenty of time to talk and exchange ideas with representatives from several local organizations. Our first meeting was with Walhi in Pontianak. Walhi is the Indonesian affiliate of the international environmental NGO Friends of the Earth and has local offices in most of the larger Indonesian islands. The meeting, held quite late in the day, was very informal. They showed us a video about the environmental effects of oil palm expansion in West Kalimantan and told us about their campaigning and lobbying activities to draw attention to the problem and slow down palm oil expansion.

Members of Walhi also commented on the impacts that Malaysian companies are having in Indonesia. The expansion of Malaysian-owned oil palm plantations in Indonesia has exacerbated problems associated to deforestation, land and peat fires, biodiversity loss, land conflicts, illegal logging, and conflicts with local communities. Palm oil is typically produced in monocultures that require large extensions of land, which puts pressure on previous land uses and its surroundings, whether tropical rainforests, community agro-forestry systems, or subsistence farming plots.

The rise of large plantations in Indonesia has brought significant impacts on the social, cultural, economic, political, and ecological lives of communities. With the expansion of palm oil plantations, local communities and indigenous groups have lost their farms and find themselves bound to smallholding schemes imposed to them by the large processors without fair credit agreement, non-transparent pricing mechanisms, land acquisition without participation in the decision-making processes, unjustified debts, etc. The large-scale palm oil expansion models have additionally resulted in historical land disputes, especially in Indonesia, which have been caused or worsened by complex legislation, lack of transparency in land use planning, and unbalanced power relations.

Early in the morning in the district of Sangau, we met with a group of smallholders who showed us how the fresh fruit bunches are harvested and cut down from the palm trees. While they performed their work, a photographer hired by Oxfam Novib took pictures of them. During our conversations with this group, conflicts on issues related to land use and land tenure became apparent. The clash between customary communal land use and newer forms of land privatization is one of the biggest problems.

Smallholders argue that companies abuse the customary land use system and deceive them by playing with different game rules: oil palm small-holdings are usually allocated in an unfair and untransparent way, based on false promises, infringed arrangements, and fraudulent application of regulations (Forest Peoples Programme, Perkumpulan Sawit Watch, & HuMA and the World Agroforestry Centre, 2006). Smallholders are usually not fully and fairly compensated for their land's worth and are not involved in setting the price for the fresh fruit bunches. This leaves them with no income security and makes them dependent on middlemen and mill owners to buy their product.

Later in the evening, we met with local community leaders, who were curious to find out what representatives of an international NGO were doing in their community. In small towns, rumors travel fast; they had heard of our presence and wanted to know what the motivations for our visit were. The elected district leader wondered why we had not sent a letter asking for permission beforehand.

As our partners from Sawit Watch continued translating for us, I began thinking about how different it was to talk to community leaders; in contrast, the conversations with people from other NGOs and farmers had been relatively easy. Communicating with community leaders – men whom women are not supposed to make eye contact with – proved to be much more difficult

because there was no dialogue, only a monologue in Bahasa Indonesia that even our Indonesian friends found difficult to follow and translate.

During this meeting our cultural differences became even more apparent; while European people pressed for a chance to ask some questions, our Indonesian translators became nervous and explained that we had to be polite and wait until they finished talking, especially since we were guests in their house. The monologue kept going for over one hour, with small interruptions only to allow for a quick translation. We had eaten not too long before that, it was very warm, and there were 10 people smoking *kretek* at the same time in the room. I started to get restless. What was the point of this meeting? What were we going to tell this people? They wanted solutions to their problems and for us to help them.

I decided to leave the room for a little while and walked outside to get some fresh air. I tried to imagine how we could explain that we were there, among other things, to take pictures for a brochure that would help Oxfam Novib raise money from the Dutch public, which would be used to fund sustainable palm oil projects that would somehow benefit them. At that moment, the connection seemed too abstract to explain in clear language to our hosts.

Puzzled, I continued to watch the tropical rain pouring down the sky and wondered how Oxfam actually managed to make a connection between the situation on the ground at the local level and its lobbying and advocacy activities at the global level. How was the discussion about the sustainability of the global palm oil sector related to the situation that I was being exposed to in Sangau? How did Oxfam Novib's private sector work in the palm oil sector contribute to eradicating poverty? What did Oxfam bring into global multi-stakeholder governance initiatives?

With these questions in mind, I began wondering whether it was Oxfam's rights-based approach to development that offered the answers to these questions. I had read a lot about the concept, but I was still not sure how it applied in practice.

To understand what taking a rights-based approach implies, first I looked at what it does not. A lot of NGOs working with palm oil producers focus on training farmers, providing them with agricultural services, and/or helping them to get certified. These organizations mostly likely viewed the process of development as one linked to the ideas of modernization or progress, in which people are considered victims or beneficiaries. Oxfam, on the other hand, claimed people to be active agents of their own development and worked to empower them so that they would have the capacity to influence public policies and make claims in defense of their own rights.

The following day, we visited another palm oil plantation and talked with the workers, mostly female laborers employed by large palm oil companies. During this meeting, we talked about work conditions in the plantation. The issues that came up in the conversation were related to health, work contracts, safety, future prospects, etc. As could be expected, the tone of the conversation was quite gloomy, as the stories of these women matched evidence of underpayment, excessive working hours, and forced and child labor, which are confirmed in several empirical studies (see for instance Colchester & Jiwan, 2006; Sirait, 2009).

Most people working in this plantation were once independent smallholders who had given up their land to the palm oil schemes promoted by the government. These schemes involved complex land allocation processes in which a nucleus state – a plantation with a mill – was established in the center and allotted to private or para-state companies according to a regional development plan. Smallholders usually had to give up their land in the process and were given minimum compensation for it. Typically, land was later reallocated in a 5:2 or 6:4 ratio and communities were 'given back' a small portion of their land for smallholding. This whole process was done without consulting with communities and, if communities objected to local officials, the media, or NGOs, their objections tended to be overlooked.

On our last day, we met with the representatives of WWF in West Kalimantan and had a very productive discussion about the expansion of oil palm plantation and the role of the RSPO in slowing down this expansion by promoting the use of land that is already degraded instead of clearing out forests to plant oil palms. The use of degraded land for palm oil, however, may replace and push the current use of that land further into the primary forest, causing deforestation indirectly. This is known as *leakage* and implies that available land works like communicating vessels; pressure that is put in one place, has an impact in another. This effect also makes it hard to claim that additional demands for biomass will not put pressure on remaining land.

What was most interesting about our conversation with WWF – at least from the perspective of my research – was to discover that they were developing projects to better understand how social, economic, and cultural rights could be included in development and conservation projects. WWF's adoption of a rights-based approach responded to the need of making a contribution to the Millennium Development Goals. This situation illustrated a growing recognition of the linkages between development and the environment.

From this point of view, it is clear that the goal of having a right to a clean environment, adequate food, housing, and security cannot be reached without effective conservation and development efforts. Many organizations, including Oxfam, recognize that when thinking about rights, the separation between environmental and social sustainability is artificial. Many conservation initiatives contributed towards the effective implementation of specific indigenous rights, while others directly impinged on people's rights, think for instance of resettlement activities.

In my visit to Indonesia, the implications of approaching development from a rights perspective became more apparent to me. The constitution of a rights-based approach into Oxfam Novib's private sector work on palm oil, however, still remained a mystery that kept me intrigued.

Participating in the 8th RSPO conference in Jakarta, Indonesia

A couple of days later, I traveled back to Jakarta, Indonesia where I attended the 8th RSPO conference meeting. The 2010 conference meeting was dedicated to conveying the message that RSPO certification was not only for large palm oil producers, but also for the millions of smallholders that grow oil palms. During the days that I spent in Jakarta, I spoke with representatives of NGOs, traders, producers, and certifiers in order to get a more complete picture of the functioning of the RSPO.

The RSPO is a multi-stakeholder initiative created in 2004 with the objective of promoting the growth and sustainable use of palm oil through the creation of a global standard and the engagement of stakeholders. WWF and Unilever initiated the RSPO and its Secretariat is based in Malaysia. It is a partnership arrangement where only private parties – businesses and NGOs – have decision-making power; governments and scientists only participate as observing members and advisors.

A General Assembly and an Executive Board manage the RSPO. It has more than 800 members from seven different stakeholder groups, namely, oil palm growers, palm oil processors and traders, consumer goods manufacturers, retailers, banks and investors, environmental/nature conservation NGOs and social/development NGOs (RSPO, 2009b).

The RSPO was conceived as a multi-stakeholder process based on the belief that equal rights should be given to each stakeholder group so that group-specific agendas could be brought to the table and decisions could be made on the basis of consensus. Each of the stakeholder group has a seat in the Executive Board and is involved in project-level working groups, ensuring that

participation is fairly allocated across sectors. Through working groups and extensive consultation processes, the RSPO developed a standard for the production of sustainable palm oil that is made of eight Principles and 39 Criteria (RSPO, 2007).

Additionally, the RSPO undertakes practical projects to facilitate the implementation of best practices; it develops solutions for the adoption and verification of best practices for plantation management, procurement, trade, and logistics; and acquires financial resources from public and private sources to finance projects (RSPO, 2008a). Although the RSPO still faces significant limitations, it has been regarded as a relatively successful case of partnered governance in terms of putting a rule-system in place and sourcing sustainable palm oil to international markets (Nikoloyuk et al., 2010; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011).

Oxfam's representative to the RSPO is a member of the Private Sector Team and works in the field of corporate responsibility with a strong focus on the palm oil sector. He is member of the Executive Board of the RSPO, where he has been most concerned with including smallholder producers into the RSPO certification scheme and preventing the struggle that local communities often have to endure in order to maintain their land and forest. As member of the Executive Board, Oxfam International occupies one of the two seats reserved for NGOs.

Designing a case study and collecting additional data

In the days after I came back from Indonesia, I continued thinking about the extent to which Oxfam's participation in the RSPO was an effective strategy to address the social aggravations that I had witnessed during my visit to the oil palm plantations. Oxfam's participation in the RSPO seemed like an appropriate case to start shedding light on the research question initially defined with practitioners at Oxfam:

In what ways and through which mechanisms are rights-based approaches articulated in multi-stakeholder initiatives, and what implications does this pose for Oxfam's participation in such initiatives?

For the purpose of investigating the extent and ways in which Oxfam is able to institutionalize a rights-based approach to development in multi-stakeholder arrangements, designing the research as a case study seemed appropriate. Case studies serve to conduct an extensive analysis of an individual unit, linking factors in relation to a specific context. In this sense, I designed this case study as an empirical, in-depth, and longitudinal examination of Oxfam's intervention in the RSPO.

Regarding Oxfam's participation in multi-stakeholder processes, the RSPO constituted an exemplary case as Oxfam had played a leading role both in the governance structure of the arrangement – as member of the Executive Board and participant of several Working Groups – and in the elaboration of the standard – providing expertise and supporting local organizations to do the same. Oxfam's consistent and committed involvement in the RSPO for over a decade had generated considerable evidence based on the rich knowledge that practitioners had of the initiative and the issues it dealt with.

The participatory nature of this research project allowed for rich data collection by means of various qualitative research techniques, including participant observation and interviews, in addition to a thorough literature review. Literature consulted included relevant scientific literature, as well as reports, emails, and other internal communication produced by Oxfam and other organizations within the international development and palm oil fields.

To collect data for the study, intensive interviews were frequently conducted with Oxfam's representative to the RSPO and Oxfam's Special Project Coordinator, with whom I sustained formal and informal conversations and information exchanges over a one-year period. The intensive interviews were conducted as a sort of *guided conversations* in the office and outside, mostly in the form of academic and professional discussions. Additionally, formal semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with 10 other stakeholders in the palm oil sector, including representatives from organizations like Both Ends, the Ministry of Economic Affairs of the Netherlands, nongovernmental organizations like WWF, Sawit Watch, and the Forest People Program.

During the research process data was systematically collected and recorded. I shared preliminary versions of this chapter with practitioners at Oxfam Novib with the purpose of testing the accuracy of my accounts and interpretations, as well as encouraging them to reflect on their own practice. Although the results are to a certain extent a joint formulation of the situation, I was careful to maintain a critical and independent attitude in the formulation of central considerations.

18. Conceptualizing the politics of scale

For a long time, the international development and human rights communities followed different institutional paths, offering little to each other. This changed in the early 1990s when human rights became an observable framework for development agencies and nongovernmental organizations (Hickey & Mitlin, 2009b). Because the human rights framework is systematically built around a body of principles and articulated in codes and constitutions, development organizations believed it could help make their practice more transparent and organized, in contrast to the more pragmatic and project-oriented frameworks traditionally used (see Chapman, 2009; Archer, 2009). Since then, development professionals have worked hard to establish a direct link between poverty and the violation of human rights (Brems & Adekoya, 2010).

Such crystallization of the exchange between the human rights and development communities can be best seen in what is now known as rights-based approaches to development. This concept gained momentum at the 1995 Copenhagen Summit on Social Development and consists of integrating the norms, standards, and principles of the international human rights system into the policies, processes, and projects of development.

In 2001, Mary Robinson, ex-UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, defined it as a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. This broad definition points not towards a single rights-based approach, but to a wide range of development approaches that break away from earlier macro-economic modernization strategies and technocratic basic needs approaches, and focus on notions of agency, capabilities, entitlements, and freedom (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Hickey & Mitlin, 2009a).

More or less at the same time that rights-based approaches materialized, traditional adversarial relationships between businesses and NGOs began shifting towards more cooperative and complementary interactions. Partnerships between businesses and NGOs became vital elements of many governance systems around sustainability issues. These voluntary approaches can be seen as a substitute to mandatory regulation, or soft law hybrids, which represent an alternative to legal disputes between governments, businesses and NGOs on the boundaries of their responsibilities (see for instance Ruggie, 2008).

Wondering about the responsibilities and roles of NGOs in this context eventually led me to exploring the geographical conceptualization of scale. In particular, I was trying to conceive the ways in which international NGOs link their global advocacy agenda to improvements at the local level, bridging the local-global divide, when an article written by Haarstad and Fløysand (2006) led me to the concept of politics of scale. In this article, the authors had used this concept to study the complexities featured in a case of opposition to mining in Peru.

Linking the concept of politics of scale to the data I was studying, I discovered that, indeed, this approach offered an entry point to simultaneously address issues of power and participation on one hand, and changing geographical scales on the other. In general, political geographers argue that the process of globalization has allowed for the emergence of new centers of power and a more complex restructuring of social, political, and economic processes. This resulted in a restructuring of scalar organization, both upwards to the global and downwards to the local levels.

In this sense, the politics of scale involves a “continuous reshuffling and reorganization of spatial scales which are an integral part of social strategies and struggles for control and empowerment” (Swyngedouw, 2000: 70). In a similar line, Brenner (2001) relates the politics of scale to the structuration of socio-spatial relationships among geographical scales in multi-level settings. Structuration here refers to a combination of actor interventions and the institutionalization of social practices.

Most often, the notion of politics of scale has been applied to a wide range of issues, especially to the uneven development of capital, the changing nature of state power, and social action and contestation. In these studies, scales are not understood as predefined arenas within which processes unfold, but rather the products of wider social, political, economic, and cultural processes. Scales are thus never fixed; instead, they are continuously being redefined, contested, and restructured through constitutive social processes (MacKinnon, 2011).

Processes of scaling and rescaling are almost always intertwined with struggles for dominance and control, unraveling the political motivations and strategies of actors who construct, alter, or are empowered by specific scalar arrangements. For this reason, thinking about the politics of scale demands moving away from a static view of power distribution among societal actors and taking a more dynamic approach to looking at how individuals and groups construct and engage with particular scales in order to renegotiate their position in relations of power (Haarstad & Fløysand, 2006).

From a politics of scale perspective, the emergence of private multi-stakeholder arrangements, such as the RSPO, can be conceptualized as a rescaling of governance by which power, agency, and responsibility are transferred both upwards and downwards (Edwards, Goodwin, & Pemberton, 2001). These new governance arrangements are not only non-exclusive and non-hierarchical, but also post-territorial since fixed, jurisdictional lines do not define their spatial and conceptual boundaries.

Specifically, the RSPO represents a specific rescaling process through which a globalized commodity market is governed. The arrangement aims to establish a mode of governing that promotes sector-wide organization and self-regulation in contrast to buyer- or producer-driven governance. In this regard, it can even be argued that arrangements like the RSPO emerge because existing scales of governance - national governments or the supply chain, for instance - become inappropriate or obsolete for addressing sector-wide sustainability issues (Meadowcroft, 2002).

Previous research on multi-actor arrangements has showed that NGOs are in principle well suited to engage with politics of scale and exercise power in a renegotiated environment, as they are able to exploit communication technology in knowledge politics and maintain networks beyond the channels of traditional institution-based politics (Arts, 2003; Glasbergen, 2010; Haarstad & Fløysand, 2006). NGOs engage with politics of scale by means of linking-up of scales, re-articulating scales, and organizing beyond scales (Arts, 2003: 502-503).

In this context, the political influence of NGOs is enhanced by their ability to transform claims in ways that enable them to gain legitimacy from hegemonic discourses, organize within networks or network-like structures, and switch between spatial scales simultaneously maintaining a material presence in places and mediated presence in global spaces (Haarstad & Fløysand, 2006: 305).

NGOs that participate in arrangements such as the RSPO become agents in the creation and contestation of social relations for which they need to develop specific strategies. From the perspective of Oxfam, I found that this implies developing strategies that link up the global and local dimensions of the problem by re-conceptualizing local issues and interests into global ones

and vice versa, all within the framework of rights-based approaches to development. More specifically, politics of scale in this context regards the capacity to capture and reorganize resources from different sectors and levels to bring the project forward.

In terms of politics of scale, these strategies can be covered under the process of rescaling responsibilities, given by:

- The creation of a *space of engagement* in terms of the ways in which actors involved in the arrangement experience a relationship between the dimensions of the problem that each of them represents. From the viewpoint of Oxfam, this implies framing the issue in such a way that rights-based issues become an integral conceptual part of the arrangement.
- The creation of *connecting spaces* that open opportunities for less empowered groups to participate in the networked structures of the arrangement. This implies that Oxfam is able to activate grassroots interests and form alliances that open opportunities for less privileged groups to participate in the arrangement.
- The creation of a *space of formal interdependence* in terms of new network relationships as constitutional part of the multi-actor arrangement. This implies that Oxfam secures the institutionalization of mechanisms that protect the rights of these groups and enhance accountability and integrity of the arrangement as a whole and of social principles particularly.

These dimensions serve as analytical lenses for conceptualizing NGO contributions to rescaling responsibilities. In the next three chapters, I use them to discuss the strategies deployed by Oxfam to articulate rights-based principles in the RSPO.

19. ■ Creating a space of engagement

In multi-actor arrangements, different groups manage a multitude of discourses and objectives that require alignment in the realization of a common goal (Van Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2008). When Oxfam joined the RSPO, it found that environmental concerns dominated the RSPO agenda. Interest in the social impacts of palm oil production and the situation of indigenous communities had, thus far, attracted the concern of a limited audience.

Therefore, Oxfam prioritized social aspects and sought to bring these issues to the forefront of RSPO discussions, as a way of ensuring some mitigation of the impacts of palm oil production on the local population. Oxfam realized this goal by problematizing what would constitute 'sustainable' palm oil. This created a space where the context and details surrounding the concrete social impacts of palm oil production could be defined, and this domain became the responsibility of NGOs.

Linking palm oil production to poverty

At the time Oxfam joined the RSPO, it faced the realization that most members had no clear understanding of how development NGOs would contribute to the design of the RSPO Principles & Criteria. While most RSPO members understood the link between palm oil production and deforestation, only a few members were aware of the relationship between palm oil production and poverty. In order to frame the discussion differently, Oxfam shared with RSPO members a series of documents highlighting the role of private actors in poverty reduction.

Specifically, Oxfam shared a paper entitled *NGOs, companies, and poverty reduction*, which discussed new trends in business-NGO relationships (Hupperts, 2006). And a second crucial document entitled, *Inclusiveness and mutual benefits for smallholders and RSPO buyers*, which explained the benefits of including smallholders in the RSPO process (Verburg, 2009). These documents triggered discussions within the RSPO about the correlation between palm oil production and poverty, thus helping to shape the "terrain of struggle" (Staeheli, 1994: 388) in which novel or contending framings could be discussed.

Defining smallholders as a relevant producer group

Early in the process, the NGOs that took part in the Criteria Working Group, a group responsible for drafting the RSPO Principles & Criteria, were concerned with the lack of representation of specific groups including trade unions, smallholders, indigenous people, and women. These groups were not invited to participate in the Criteria Working Group, nor were their interests addressed or included in the proceedings of the standard itself. This is evidenced by the fact that the original draft of the Principles & Criteria did not include certification guidance for smallholders and limited social criteria to the technical aspects of worker's pay and conditions, health, safety, and training for local communities (RSPO, 2008b).

The initial exclusion of smallholders may be attributed to the conviction of large producer groups, such as the semi-public producer organization IPOC (Indonesian Palm Oil Commission), regarding the inability of smallholders to meet the standard requirements and certification costs (see RSPO, 2005a; RSPO, 2005b). Oxfam and the other development NGOs challenged this perception by stressing the importance of smallholders, as a producer group, in worldwide palm

oil production. Approximately three million smallholder farmers produce 25% of global palm oil (Colchester & Jiwan, 2006). As a result of this emphasis, social criteria were better specified and linked to current international instruments and practices, such as the Conventions of the International Labor Organization.

In addition to this, having growers and mills treat smallholders in a transparent and fair manner was introduced as a criterion in the Principles & Criteria. An interpretation of the RSPO standard was also tailored for smallholders, making for the first time a distinction between ‘independent’ and ‘schemed’ smallholders (RSPO, 2009a). Here, independent smallholders are defined as self-organized and self-financed groups that have the freedom to choose how they use their land, which crops to cultivate, and are not bound by any particular mill or association. Scheme smallholders are defined as entities that are structurally bound by contract, credit agreement, or planning to a particular mill and are often not free to choose which crop to grow. By including smallholders in the RSPO proceedings, a new scale of certification was produced, preventing that solely large plantations benefited from access to the novel ‘sustainable’ palm oil market created by the RSPO.

Delineating the unit of certification

Palm oil is extracted from fresh fruit bunches which grow atop oil palms. Fruit bunches weigh approximately 25 kg and need to be processed within 48 hours after they are harvested. The sterilization, digestion, and pressing of the fruit takes place in mills that are located on the palm oil plantations. Initially, the RSPO had conceptualized the mill as the unit of certification. However, since smallholders rely upon nearby mills to buy their produce, development NGOs demanded that the RSPO designate the unit of certification as the mill together with its supply base. In this way, the certificate refers to both the processing facility and the unit of land from which the fruit was originally extracted. In delineating the unit of certification in this way, the structure of the opportunity was enlarged so as to create a more equitable relationship between the parties.

Placing land-related issues on the RSPO agenda

Oxfam’s commitment to framing social and development issues around human rights is further evidenced by how it took advantage of external pressure to problematize land-related discussions inside the RSPO. Since joining the RSPO, Oxfam and other NGOs tried, without much initial success, to draw attention to how changes in land-use affect the livelihood of local communities. NGOs also aimed to draw attention to the detrimental effects that weak regulatory frameworks have on land ownership regimes. Their success in this area changed when local Indonesian NGOs published a report together with Friends of the Earth, an international environmental NGO. The report accused Wilmar, the world’s largest palm oil trader and a member of the RSPO, of illegal logging, setting fire to forests, and violating the rights of local communities in Indonesia.

In doing so, the report also exposed RSPO policies as being “hollow and inadequate” (Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands), Lembaga Gemawan, & Kontak Rakyat Borneo., 2007) and raised concerns about the codes of conduct of Unilever, the World Bank, Rabobank, and other European financiers. The external criticism that stemmed from the publication of this report pressured the RSPO to amend its policies in a manner that further regulated the conduct of its members. Taking advantage from the situation, Oxfam underscored before the Executive Board the need for the RSPO to further engage with issues linked to land.

In particular, Oxfam drew attention to the potentially undermining effects of the palm oil sector expansion on local food security and the right to food. Replacing subsistence farming land with

large plantations, Oxfam argued, would constrain local communities' access to natural resources such as forests, land, and water, ultimately threatening their livelihood. Additionally, Oxfam called on the RSPO to prevent human rights abuses related to the deployment of private and public security forces, mainly in relation to protests around land-related conflicts (Oxfam International, 2007).

To this end, Oxfam and its allies promoted the adoption of instruments such as the *Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights* (see Voluntary Principles, 2000) and *Free, Prior, and Informed Consent* (see detail in chapter 21) to prevent land disputes between RSPO members and local communities.

20 ■ Creating connecting spaces

The sustainability challenges associated with palm oil production are multi-scalar, with effects spanning across spaces of local production and international consumption. The creation of a production standard to address these challenges required the participation of diverse groups from a wide range of countries and sectors, and the mobilization of large amounts of resources. As our analytical approach asserts, one important feature of the actors that engage with a politics of scale is the capacity to construct networks of association with, and mobilize resources from, agencies and groups operating on different scales, thus enlarging their capacity to act (Edwards et al., 2001: 292). Oxfam's contribution to the creation of such 'connecting spaces' has been primarily geared towards facilitating the participation and empowerment of less powerful groups within the RSPO.

Building and sustaining insider/outsider NGO alliances

NGOs deploy different strategies and tactics to achieve their goals (see Barkaso, 2010). While some take an insider approach to influencing the behavior of governments and businesses through collaboration, other NGOs chose to exert pressure and mobilize public opinion with external campaigns and boycotts (Gulbrandsen & Steinar, 2004; Yanacopulos, 2005). Oxfam, like many other international NGOs, utilizes a combination of insider and outsider approaches.

In the particular case of the RSPO, Oxfam's collaboration with other NGOs, both inside and outside the RSPO, has been crucial in advancing the social agenda. Occasionally, Oxfam engages with NGOs that oppose or criticize the RSPO like Greenpeace and Fiends of the Earth. As our earlier example on land issues showed, this strategy aims to deliberately use the campaigns and protests of opposing NGOs as a means to promote compliance and diligence regarding contending issues within the RSPO. Likewise, by forming alliances with other NGOs inside the RSPO, Oxfam has been able to strategize and present a coordinated response in the arrangement. Alliances with NGOs such as Both Ends, Solidaridad, Sawit Watch, and the Pesticide Action Network have been instrumental to empower marginalized groups to participate in the arrangement and ensure that local demands are linked to global processes.

These efforts have been crystallized in the creation of the Smallholder Task Force and the Verification Working Group (Oxfam International, 2007; Oxfam International, 2008). The Smallholder Task Force was entrusted with the development of the standards and procedures for the certification of both scheme and independent smallholders. Sawit Watch and the Forest Peoples Program led the Task Force, while Oxfam partook as a member of the Steering Group. The Verification Working Group was in charge of conducting trials to ensure that the RSPO standard was operationally sound (see details in Chapter 22).

Mobilizing resources for capacity and empowerment

The formation of alliances assists to mobilize resources and strengthen the capacities of specific groups. Over the years, Oxfam has provided financial support to the palm oil platform of various Dutch development and environmental NGOs, as well as to specific projects within the RSPO's

Criteria, Smallholder, New Plantings, and Greenhouse Gas Working Groups. Oxfam has also provided funding to Sawit Watch, a local Indonesian NGO, to support local communities that have lost their land and livelihood due to the large-scale palm oil expansion of the last decade.

Email communication between representatives of Oxfam, Sawit Watch, Both Ends, and WWF has been circulated regarding the participation of Sawit Watch in the RSPO. One particular message stated, "*Sawit Watch [is] getting up to speed, but needs further financial and moral support in the RSPO*". This observation led to the formation of a trilateral partnership between Sawit Watch, Oxfam, and Hivos (the Dutch Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation) aimed at increasing Sawit Watch's capacity and ensuring financial and technical support for smallholder-related activities (Oxfam International, 2007).

Sawit Watch has an extensive national and international network that promotes the conservation and restoration of forests through raising community awareness. Moreover, it seeks to secure land rights and enforce traditional community laws. Sawit Watch provides funding to Serikat Patani Kalapa Sawit (SPKS), an independent Indonesian palm oil smallholders' association created in 2006. SPKS has 6000 members located in five provinces.

Local farmer organizations, like SPKS, and Southern NGOs, such as Sawit Watch, provide Northern NGOs with expertise and access to their local networks, enabling international advocacy NGOs, like Oxfam, to deliver more tangible impacts at the grassroots level. Nonetheless, the uneven capacities and different working cultures among local and international NGOs are a reality and continue to threaten the existence of such connecting spaces. From an empowerment perspective, these North-South NGO alliances allow Southern NGOs to position themselves better against more powerful actors and to make claims at higher scales.

Southern NGOs gain power by forming "networks of association" (Cox, 1998: 2) with allies that have access to a wider pool of resources and organizations. Empowerment in this sense is not an outcome, but a process whereby less powerful groups are eventually perceived as legitimate participants in the RSPO arrangement. For instance, more recently it has become common practice for Sawit Watch to facilitate meetings between representatives of local communities, indigenous groups, smallholders, and laborers and representatives of firms like Neste Oil, IOI, United Plantations, IFC/World Bank, Wilmar, and Sime Darby (Sawit Watch, 2010).

Gate keeping and overseeing participation in the arrangement

The structure of the RSPO is characterized by functional representation where all stakeholder groups have two seats on the Executive Board, with the exception of growers who have four seats. Together, environmental and development NGOs have as many seats as growers. Although this guarantees a balance of voting power between the different groups, it does not necessarily secure the representation of their constituency. Particularly, Oxfam represents the interests of its confederation, and it also represents the interests of its constituents or groups that are marginalized in the current economic system.

Oxfam seeks to create "spaces of resistance" (Staeheli, 1994: 387) within the RSPO where the voices of such groups can be heard. For that purpose, Oxfam provides two gate-keeping functions. First, by holding the door open for representatives of affected communities and smallholder organizations, Oxfam allows them to take part in the RSPO. For instance, in 2006, a member of SPKS addressed the RSPO audience for the first time, exposing the violations that some companies committed against local communities. Angered by SPKS's accusations, representatives of the larger producer groups threatened to leave the room. However, social and environmental NGOs managed to convince RSPO members of the necessity to provide a space for such contributions.

Since then, approximately 50 representatives of local groups have found direct access to the RSPO process and support for submitting their claims.

The second gate-keeping role Oxfam and its partners perform consists in overseeing the terms of participation in the RSPO. This is a particularly important role as more organizations seek either to join or to leave the arrangement. Specifically, most NGOs within the RSPO aim that non-compliant members, such as Sinar Mas (see Greenpeace, 2010) and IOI (see Grassroots, 2010), remain participants of the arrangement. Such NGOs believe that positive change and improvement is more likely to occur within the contours of the RSPO. In this vein, Oxfam argues that there is a higher likelihood of continued poor business practices and disregard for other stakeholders' demands if dissenting members are expelled from the RSPO. In summary, the gate-keeping function ensures that non-compliant behavior, marginalized voices, and the viewpoints of opposing groups are not disregarded.

21. ■ Creating a space formal interdependence

Formal interdependence in this particular context is created by institutionalizing mechanisms that protect the rights of disenfranchised groups in the RSPO standard and by enhancing the accountability and integrity of the RSPO as an institution. Introduced by Oxfam and its allies in the RSPO, these mechanisms encompass a Smallholder Task Force; the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent instrument; a Code of Conduct; and a Dispute Settlement Facility.

Notably, the creation of formal interdependence is largely accountable to the existing informal bonds and relationships between Oxfam and other members of the RSPO. Below we discuss how formal and informal interdependence sustain each other in a dynamic system, creating new opportunities to increase NGO influence and formalize change.

Securing the rights of marginalized groups

The production of certified palm oil under RSPO criteria implies advanced technical, financial, and organizational capacities. And in 2005, Oxfam, Sawit Watch, and other NGOs raised concerns about the abilities of smallholders to meet RSPO criteria. They urged the RSPO to set up the Smallholder Task Force to ensure that more inclusive business models were considered and that the interests of smallholders became sufficiently articulated and operationalized in the RSPO (RSPO, 2009c). Since then, the Smallholder Task Force has developed interpretations for the certification of smallholder groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, and Thailand. Since 2007, the Task Force has been financially supported by a group of Dutch NGOs (Oxfam Novib, Hivos, Cordaid, Stichting Doen) and the Dutch government.

Additionally, this group of NGOs persuaded RSPO members to include the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in the Principles & Criteria (Oxfam International, 2008). FPIC ensures that the interests of local communities are observed during the establishment of new palm oil plantations. Since 2005, FPIC has emerged as a key principle in international law and jurisprudence. For instance, it has been included in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which has been adopted by 144 countries. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is widely accepted in private sector policies, particularly in the hydropower, extractives, forestry, and agro-food sectors (Forest Peoples Programme, 2008).

FPIC instructs investors and companies to engage with indigenous peoples and local communities in informed and non-coercive negotiations prior to the establishment of any infrastructural or agricultural development on customary lands. Moreover, FPIC demands participatory assessments, careful project design, and benefit-sharing agreements in which local communities have the ability to grant or withhold consent to activities that might affect their cultures, traditional knowledge, territories, and other rights.

In particular, the importance of FPIC in the context of the RSPO lies on its potential to stimulate the participation of local actors and re-cast them as citizens with agency to make and shape decisions that affect their social and economic life. To secure the inclusion of FPIC in the Principles & Criteria, Oxfam and its allies argued that adequate compliance with the FPIC would produce substantial contributions to compliance with other criteria in the RSPO standard.

Securing the accountability and integrity of the RSPO process

The design and implementation of the RSPO Principles & Criteria, both at the level of the plantation and the supply chain, was primarily a technical process that circumvented most political and contentious issues, for the sake of progress. As a result, a number of serious problems arose during the first trials of interpretation and implementation of the standard, especially concerning the social and new plantings criteria (Nikoloyuk et al., 2010: 67). Such complexities prompted concern among NGOs and acted as the catalyst that led them to support the creation of the Verification Working Group in 2005.

The Verification Working Group was created to ensure that the Principles & Criteria were operational through the design of an auditing scheme and by conducting pilot projects. The provisions of this group stated that companies could only obtain certification for individual management units if they meet certain minimum criteria in all their holdings. Yet, in 2008 Greenpeace found that United Plantations only complied with RSPO criteria in its Malaysian plantations, but not in its plantations in Indonesia (Greenpeace, 2008). The evidence provided by the report severely threatened the legitimacy of the process and the role of NGOs in the RSPO (Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). Taking advantage of the pressure exerted by critical NGOs, Oxfam lobbied the Executive Board internally for tougher accountability measures.

Not long after, the General Assembly approved what has become known as the Oxfam resolution and drafted a Code of Conduct. This Code of Conduct states that certification will only be granted to companies whose entire holdings met certain minimum criteria. It also forces members to specify time-bound commitments for supplying or sourcing certified sustainable palm oil and to publish annual progress reports (RSPO, 2008a). The Code of Conduct provides an additional avenue for NGOs to hold corporate actors accountable to their commitments in the context of the RSPO.

Initiating a conflict mediation facility

Pervasive land-related conflicts between RSPO members and local communities also threaten the legitimacy of the RSPO. Millions of Indonesians living in and making a living off of the forests are indigenous peoples with customary (*adat*) governing systems. A lack of coherence in the national laws permit varying interpretations, which render *adat* rights subordinate to the national interest and strip indigenous groups from control over their land (Colchester & Jiwan, 2006). In 2010, Sawit Watch was involved in monitoring, communicating, and preparing court cases for approximately 630 land-related conflicts. The Forest Peoples Program has also referenced up to 3100 ongoing palm oil land disputes (Forest Peoples Programme et al., 2006).

As a result, in 2006, the idea to create a space specifically for managing such conflicts was born. Both Ends, inspired by the growing body of expertise from the fields of commerce, peace building, and employment, proposed the creation of a mediation facility within the RSPO to provide companies, local communities, and other stakeholders the means to deal with disputes in a preventive and remedial manner.

In 2008, the Executive Board approved the creation of the Dispute Settlement Facility, which was set up to assist with the mutual resolution of disputes before it became necessary to invoke the grievance mechanisms of the RSPO. The Dispute Settlement Facility promotes a more direct participation from local actors and underscores their role in claiming, monitoring, and enforcing rights themselves. As a new mediation arena, the Dispute Settlement Facility provides support for less powerful groups to demand an increased accountability and responsibility from corporate actors.

22. Institutionalizing rights-based approaches to development: Opportunities, challenges, and limitations

During their initial conversations, WWF and Unilever discussed different methods for tackling the deforestation caused by the rapid expansion of the palm oil sector. Soon they realized that the scope of the RSPO could not be limited to the issue of forest conversion alone. The social spillover effects of deforestation would also have to be addressed. When Oxfam accepted the invitation to participate in the RSPO, it estimated that through the cultivation of the right opportunities, a more sustainable palm oil production system could provide smallholders and communities with some correction to the existing power imbalance. In turn, Oxfam believed, access to international markets would help smallholders and communities to secure an income and strengthen their position vis-à-vis the private sector. Our analysis of Oxfam's intervention in the RSPO reveals some of the conditions that created the opportunities, challenges, and limitations for the institutionalization of rights-based principles in the RSPO.

Opportunities

Oxfam's ability to 'play' the politics of scale with the RSPO and contribute to the rescaling of responsibilities is largely attributed to four main factors. The first factor concerns the social characteristics of the problem. The fact that both Unilever and WWF recognized the necessity for broadening the scope of the arrangement to include social, as well as environmental criteria meant that by the time Oxfam joined the RSPO it found it easier to problematize social issues. Notably, Oxfam was able to do so in such way that social issues became, if not attractive, at least essential for the RSPO.

Second, Oxfam's role has also been positively affected by the interdependence of Northern and Southern actors. A North-South co-dependence, in which developing countries produce palm oil and depend on developed countries to consume, characterizes palm oil production. This meant that involving only NGOs from the North in the RSPO would not suffice. The presence of NGOs and producer organizations from Indonesia, Malaysia, Colombia, and other producer countries made it possible for Oxfam to contribute to creating opportunities for less empowered groups to jump scales and place their claims at a higher level.

Third, Oxfam's ability to promote policy innovation by introducing, translating, and helping to implement new ideas has to do with what Oborn et al. (2011) call agency in the policy process. This prompted the legitimization of new social relations and the uptake of certain human rights principles. Fourth, Oxfam's intervention in the RSPO has been incremental and determined by a combination of opportunistic behavior and a strategic pursuit of objectives. Oxfam has taken advantage of the more flexible and dynamic interaction offered by private governance arrangements in order to increase the influence of marginalized groups and to ensure that they benefit from the new production regime.

Challenges

Oxfam faced at least three main challenges in the articulation of rights-based notions in the RSPO. The first challenge relates to the social and political construction of the issue. Initially, creating in

the RSPO a common understanding of the relationship between palm oil production, poverty, and human rights was difficult. Oxfam and the other NGOs dedicated substantial amounts of time and resources to convey the social and political dimensions of specific aspects of palm oil production, such as the impact of land conversion on the livelihood of local communities and the need for including certification for smallholders in the Principles & Criteria, to other stakeholders in the RSPO.

The second challenge involved forming alliances with like-minded organizations. Much of what has been realized in the RSPO can largely be attributed to existing informal bonds and engagements between development NGOs. Stakeholder relationships do not occur in a vacuum, but usually evolve from previous interactions. This suggests that effective intervention in private governance arrangements depend on securing prior support from a number of allies. Entering the RSPO without allies might have rendered Oxfam's intervention less viable. The formation of formal and informal alliances with other NGOs was indispensable in achieving the aggregation of resources necessary for creating and sustaining the Smallholder Task Force, the Dispute Settlement Facility, and other projects. Equally important was how Oxfam obtained business allies, such as the Body Shop or New Britain Palm Oil Ltd., to conceive of and support the social agenda.

Most importantly, alliances with other NGOs and businesses were instrumental to appropriately respond to external threats and internal conflicts. External threats originated predominately from critical reviews made by NGOs outside the RSPO, which Oxfam used as leverage to modify the RSPO agenda. Internal conflicts, on the contrary, emerged from the articulation of contentious definitions and human rights instruments in the RSPO standard. For example, the missing definition of "smallholder" required that NGOs broadened the scope of discussion to produce a more nuanced characterization of this stakeholder group.

Similarly, in securing the rights of indigenous groups, email exchanges between NGO representatives demonstrate that anchoring FPIC in the Principles & Criteria was made possible due to the ability of NGOs to introduce FPIC as a technical concept that was to be integrated into the management cycle of firms. This achievement required stripping FPIC from its political dimensions and distracting attention from the more controversial discussion on indigenous rights.

The third challenge faced by Oxfam relates to the difficulty in measuring the relative effectiveness of its intervention in the RSPO. This is especially true given that Oxfam joined the RSPO without a thorough engagement strategy. At the time, the NGO gauged its participation in the RSPO as an opportunity and joined the arrangement only with a general set of objectives to pursue. Oxfam's engagement in the RSPO has been a process of both discovery and experimentation, rendering everything gained as an achievement.

More generally, Oxfam's participation in and support of private governance arrangements, such as the RSPO, points towards its endorsement of market-based mechanisms as vehicles for sustainable change. This, despite not being a problem in itself, demands that Oxfam is attentive to the tensions that might emerge in relation to its more political profile, as defined by a rights-based approach to development.

Limitations

A number of limitations remain regarding the articulation of human rights principles in the RSPO. First, Oxfam's participation in the arrangement must be placed within and contextualized by the boundaries set by the RSPO as a governance mechanism. Since not all social dimensions of palm oil production are addressed by the RSPO, relying on the RSPO as a governance arrangement

poses obstacles for addressing the substantial scope of the sustainability problem. For example, the participation of women and the inclusion of a gender perspective in the Principles & Criteria are lacking in the RSPO. Other issues related to labor, biofuels, and alternatives to the pesticide Paraquat have also only been partially addressed, despite NGOs' demands (see RSPO, 2012b).

Second, the rules of participation in the RSPO also remain problematic. Despite providing novel avenues for less empowered groups to place their demands at higher scales and to access a wider network of resources and knowledge, the RSPO, and in particular the Smallholder Task Force, thus far only deal with issues about smallholders. Hence, failing to make smallholders constitutive participants of the governance arrangement. As Staeheli (1994) and Jonas (2006) state, the ability to jump or transcend scales does not necessarily guarantee the empowerment of social groups or the transformation of social relations. In fact, the mediation of rights through a specific form of identity, such as that of 'smallholder', might result in further exclusion of and competition between social groups.

Furthermore, the creation of new spaces of participation, such as FPIC, the Smallholder Task Force, and the Dispute Settlement Facility, needs to be appraised within the context in which they have been created. Although various stakeholders have created most participatory spaces within the RSPO collaboratively, none of them have been demanded through collective action and mobilization from "below". In contrast, they can be characterized as "invited spaces" (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000: 7), rather than autonomous participatory spaces.

Third, another problematic issue undermining the capacity of the RSPO is the private sector's failure to comply with the rules of the regime. Currently, only half of the RSPO members publish annual reports and commit to producing and/or purchasing certified sustainable palm oil. This violation of the Code of Conduct begs the question as to whether the market as a whole will reach the crucial tipping point in which the sector becomes more sustainable, in relation to the terms set out by the RSPO Principles & Criteria (for detail see RSPO, 2007).

Additionally, the fact that palm oil or palm oil derivatives certified by the RSPO can be purchased through three different supply systems – segregated, mass balance, and book and claim (RSPO, 2011) – renders claims made about the production and use of sustainable palm oil elusive. Particularly, the book and claim system, which replaces purchasing sustainable palm oil in physical volumes with electronic Green Palm certificates, has contributed to an exceeding supply of certified palm oil to the international market (RSPO, 2012a). This has further stimulated skepticism among those who view certification as a limited or flawed approach to solving sustainability challenges.

Fourth, the persistence of land-related conflicts continues to threaten the legitimacy of the RSPO, as well as the empowerment of local groups. Scandals involving RSPO members about abusive corporate practices in land disputes in Colombia, Indonesia, and Malaysia (see Body Shop & Christian Aid, 2010; Forest Peoples Programme et al., 2006; Grassroots, 2010) diminish the capacity of the RSPO to provide meaningful mechanisms for accountability and social participation.

23. **Enforcing human rights in collaborative governance: Advantages and restrictions for NGOs**

Over the last decade, development NGOs have expanded their service delivery and advocacy efforts, becoming more engaged in partnerships with other private actors to create social and political change. In particular, NGOs that have adopted rights-based approaches to development deploy strategies explicitly geared towards the empowerment of less powerful actors so that they are able to exercise their rights and benefit from private governance regimes.

Here, we have developed a politics of scale framework that has permitted us to distinguish three different dimensions at which the impacts of NGO interventions occur; namely, spaces of engagement, connecting spaces, and spaces of formal interdependence. Such dimensions do not unfold naturally and successively. Instead, targeted actions and strategic maneuvers are required to realize change at each dimension. While the creation of a space of engagement always precedes and is a pre-condition for the creation of a space of formal interdependence, our analysis suggests that the creation of connecting spaces sustains the realization of the other two dimensions.

This indicates that activating grassroots interests, as well as forming alliances with partners and allies, largely enables the institutionalization of rights-based principles in private governance regimes. In the case of Oxfam's intervention in the RSPO, the opportunities to articulate rights-based principles were mostly determined by the social characteristics of the problem and the ability of Oxfam to combine strategic intent with opportunistic behavior. Other critical factors include Oxfam's capacity to form and sustain networks and to capture and reorganize resources within the boundaries of the RSPO and beyond.

Despite Oxfam's ability to introduce a number of human rights principles in the RSPO, important limitations for inducing radical changes to the balance of power and inclusiveness of the palm oil sector persist. Hence, the question as to the extent to which NGOs can and should regard private governance arrangements as vehicles for the practical deployment of rights-based approaches to development.

In this regard, my research found that engagement in private governance processes gives NGOs valuable advantages since they:

- Offer potential for filling governance gaps by allowing private actors to participate and propose solutions in areas where governments are unwilling to or incapable of doing so.
- Offer the possibility of engaging in synergistic, innovative relationships with early adopters for the creation of new products and benchmarks that can beget significant changes to current practice.
- Encompass sector-wide interventions, thus offering a broader potential for change than collaboration with individual organizations.

Nevertheless, collaborating with businesses also presents substantial restrictions to NGOs, especially for those with a political agenda and operating across different scales. These restrictions and their corresponding recommendations (in italics), include:

- It is difficult for NGOs to estimate the capacity and time that they need to commit to an engagement such as the RSPO. Due to the experimental nature of such governance processes, the multitude of actors and interests that they encompass, and the characteristics of the problems that they address, it is difficult to recognize when an organization needs to withdraw from participating in such an arrangement. *NGOs should formulate an exit strategy at the beginning of their engagement in order to overcome this challenge.*
- NGOs may encounter a dilemma when trying to combine insider/ outsider approaches. NGOs collaborating with businesses must retain their prerogative to criticize and campaign against such private interests. This crucial role is often taken over by NGOs outside the collaboration process. *Strategic coordination with NGOs inside and outside the collaborative arrangement is essential for achieving the desired changes in a particular issue-area or sector.*
- International NGOs must coordinate their different activities (e.g., advocacy, campaigning, consumer awareness, service provisioning) and the diverse approaches of their affiliates and partners. *Effective organizational support and capacity is needed to ensure that activities are coherent and properly embedded in the organization's strategies.*
- Tensions between Northern and Southern NGOs are likely to emerge as their interests, cultures, and capacities differ. International NGOs are forced to fulfill a dual position by representing the interests of local groups, while simultaneously building their capacity so that they are able to represent their interests themselves. *International NGOs can best mitigate this inherent tension by fulfilling a brokering role, rather than a representing role, in relation to their Southern partners.*
- By supporting private governance initiatives, NGOs may be misperceived as implicitly acknowledging that private, voluntary regulation can act as a substitute for mandatory regulation. In reality, NGOs largely regard private standards as a secondary alternative to mandatory regulation. In order to overcome this misperception, *NGOs should explicitly articulate their vision about how voluntary and mandatory regulation complement and reinforce each other.*

In general terms, the introduction of a rights-based approach in private governance arrangements presents itself as a balancing act in which questions related to the environment, the market, and the livelihood of people need to be concomitantly weighted. A focus on rights demands that NGOs deal with the tensions brought about by the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights, by which no one right can be prioritized over another (Brems, 2001; Brems, 2008). NGOs taking part in collaborative governance arrangements like the RSPO, should state, early on in the process, the specific rights that ought to be articulated in the standard. In this way, NGOs can help prevent private interests from obscuring the development potential of private regulation.

24. Discussing results and insights with practitioners

In the early days of October 2011, I presented a shortened version of the results of this study to the Private Sector Team. My role in these meetings was usually one of observer, mostly listening and taking notes to elaborate minutes. I participated in the discussion only on issues related to my research, and approximately once a month I took the floor to present or discuss anything directly related to my research.

During the October meeting, I presented the analytical framework and conclusions of this study to the Team. Reactions to my presentation were mixed. Most people found it difficult to follow my presentation, arguing that the discussion was too abstract. Only a couple of people who had been more closely involved with the inquiry process found the results of my research relevant to their work. Even though I had anticipated these reactions, I was again puzzled with the challenge of bringing theory and practice closer together. Would that ever be possible? Or would academics and practitioners continue sailing in different waters? At that moment, the outcomes of my presentation to the Private Sector Team offered little motivation or insights as to how to proceed with the inquiry.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome was seeing the Private Sector Team come to terms with the fact that measuring and evaluating Oxfam's contribution to any private sector intervention would only be possible if specific change goals and an exit strategy were explicitly formulated at the beginning of the engagement, as it is done with most direct poverty eradication projects. The experimental nature of multi-stakeholder engagement needed to become more sophisticated.

During the same week of my presentation, Oxfam came under a lot of external pressure due to the airing of a documentary on palm oil by Dutch TV program Zembla. Since 1995, Zembla presents short documentaries over controversial issues and events in society aiming to stir public opinion. The emission on palm oil showed, arguably, a one-sided presentation of IOI's human rights and environmental violations in Sarawak, Malaysia. IOI is a large palm oil producer and supplier of food giant Unilever, the largest global palm oil buyer and chairman of the RSPO.

The documentary accused the RSPO, and in particular Oxfam and Unilever as two of the main driving forces behind the arrangement, of not condemning IOI's conduct and continuing to allow it to take part in the RSPO; thus undermining thus the credibility of the whole certification process. Oxfam feared a strong reaction of disapproval from the public not only because of the overly negative portrayal of the case, but also because of the poor role of Oxfam's Head of Lobby and Advocacy during the interview conducted by Zembla.

The public's reaction to the documentary in social media and the press was not as bad as Oxfam had originally anticipated. Yet, one could not help but wonder why Oxfam had not chosen its RSPO representative to be interviewed by Zembla. The decision to have had another person interviewed at that time – that seemed unprepared and unqualified, even when in reality it was not the case – addresses what could be regarded as a tactical error that put Oxfam in a relatively vulnerable position. The argument for having done so was that featuring Oxfam's representative to the RSPO in the documentary represented a conflict of interests since that person also held a seat in the Executive Board of the RSPO and led the Dispute Settlement Facility.

This conflicting situation goes to show some of the tensions that an NGO can experience when it participates in collaborative governance processes. Oxfam had made great efforts to retain its right to be critical of the RSPO – a position called *critical insider*. Regardless, demonstrating fear for a conflict of interests might suggest that Oxfam was concerned with becoming exposed in the documentary. Why Oxfam decided to display a more distant relationship with the RSPO than it really had, I did not understand. I would have expected it to take a more aggressive position in the documentary and defend the role it had played as leading member of the Dispute Settlement Facility in trying to get a fair settlement between IOI and the affected communities of Sangau.

Against most odds, the documentary brought some positive outcomes for Oxfam at the internal level. It became clear that Oxfam's function of pressuring non-complying members to change their practices and engage in mediation processes with local communities to solve land-related problems needed to be publicly reinforced. Internal discussions about the need for the RSPO to "*show its teeth*", as they put it, and become fiercer about obligating members to comply with the standard and the Code of Conduct, became the topic of the week.

Meanwhile, Oxfam's managing team hesitated as to whether they would renew Oxfam's position in the RSPO's Executive Board. They worried about their ability to retain internal support and capacity within the Oxfam confederation, at the same time as managing external reputation risks and remaining accountable to partners and constituents.

25. Concluding thoughts

The tensions caused by the broadcast of the documentary by Zembla, along with the demands placed by Oxfam's global campaign GROW (Oxfam International, 2014b), triggered an internal necessity for drafting a comprehensive palm oil strategy that guided Oxfam's work in the years to come. Not too long later, I also confirmed that the results of my research on Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil had served to reveal some of the weaknesses in Oxfam's palm oil change strategy.

Until then, Oxfam had elaborated annual plans to guide its participation in the RSPO from a private sector engagement perspective. But never before had a palm oil plan considered interventions from a broader development perspective. This meant that changes in the palm oil sector would no longer be pursued exclusively from a certification perspective. Aspects of smallholder projects and climate change were also being addressed within the larger scope of GROW.

So far, the work of Oxfam in the RSPO had been largely concentrated within the Private Sector Team in the Lobby and Advocacy department. The reality, however, was that Oxfam's palm oil-related work was expanding beyond the scope of the RSPO and Oxfam's position in the arrangement was starting to compete or clash against other campaigning and poverty eradication strategies. For this reason, it was necessary to reposition Oxfam's participation in the RSPO within the full array of private sector interventions.

For this task, Oxfam hired an external consultancy firm. To me, this was notable, as I would have expected that the Private Sector Team would have elaborated the strategy. And what was even more remarkable was that I was asked to act as a sort of liaison between the consultant and the practitioners, helping to structure the document and providing feedback.

As with many other things in the world of practitioners, the need for a comprehensive palm oil strategy emerged from a crisis and was taken up in an effort to manage risks. The demand was addressed with enthusiasm and energy at first. The consultant began working on the document, and we exchanged drafts on a daily basis. The first deadline came a few days later when we were asked to justify before Oxfam Novib's management the participation of the organization in the RSPO Executive Board. They approved an extension; Oxfam would continue to occupy a seat in the Executive Board.

The more I interacted with the consultant, the better I could grasp the sizeable challenges to be faced. One of the first tasks of the consultant was to collect all palm oil-related information, which was available throughout the organization. Strikingly, this information rested mainly inside the heads of the practitioners. Extracting and organizing what they knew became a copious process. Where do you start with someone that has been working on the RSPO for eight years?

The second challenge was trying to align palm oil actions with current and past Oxfam policies, both at the confederation and the affiliate level. These policies had changed dramatically over the years and they were recorded in several documents, including annual plans, country strategies, campaigning strategies, theories of change, actor strategies, etc. As part of the information gathering process we sustained conversations with the representative to the RSPO and other people working on palm oil. These exchanges often turned into fundamental discussions about the potentials and limitations of private governance.

At the beginning, I was surprised that they had asked me to facilitate some parts of this process. I felt that I did not know enough. But, soon I became aware of the fact that I was better equipped to reflect on Oxfam's involvement in the palm oil sector than most people. Using information from my study, as well as internal Oxfam planning documents and information from the GROW campaign we began drafting a strategy. One of the most unique experiences I had during these weeks was shifting from my role as researcher to that of an expert. In the eyes of my colleagues at Oxfam, one year of studying their private sector program had turned me into a proficient source on the subject. They trusted me, but also relied on me completely. It felt as if one day I had been new to their practice, and the next I was an expert.

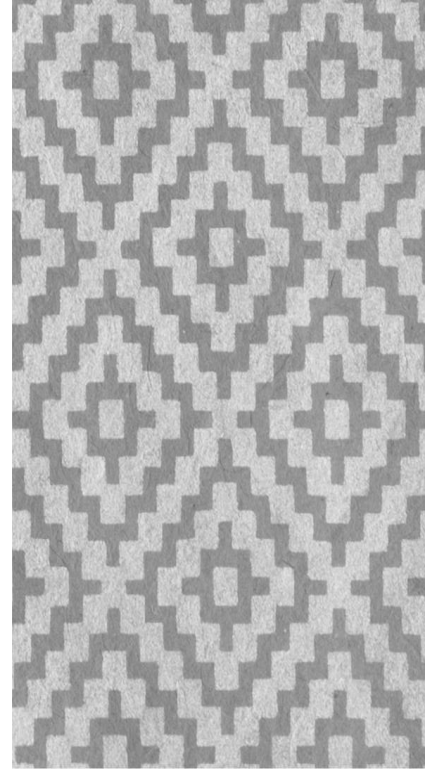
The drafting of the new institutional palm oil strategy became a rather interesting process, until it began to slowly fade behind the more urgent nature of daily tasks. For one, the Private Sector Coordinator was appointed to a new position in Oxfam International, leaving the Program without a leader for some weeks. Also, practitioners involved in the RSPO went away on duty trips, and then the Christmas break came along. With this, the drafting of the new palm oil strategy became indefinitely postponed.

When I asked about the status of the strategy around March 2012, the new Private Sector Coordinator – an old member of the Private Sector Team – explained that Oxfam Novib's management was again reconsidering Oxfam's membership in the RSPO's Executive Board. The pervasiveness of land-related conflicts in the sector worried them. They doubted if perhaps pressuring non-complying members from the position of a *critical outsider* would be more effective. With these hesitations in mind, practitioners decided it was a good time to call the consultant again.

As I finished writing this chapter, one thing that stuck with me was the uncertainty that Oxfam showed with respect to some aspects of private sector engagement. The demands of their daily activities, together with a deficient formal learning process, had prevented practitioners from becoming better aware of the assumptions underlying their work. When I had come to Oxfam in 2010, the organization had appeared as concerned with engaging in continuous learning. Yet, now I was hesitant regarding practitioners' ability for shaping their own practice.

I sensed that the knowledge that practitioners had acquired in a decade of engagement with businesses had to be greater of what was readily accessible. A better understanding of Oxfam's engagement with the private sector in general, and of the strategic considerations therein, was needed. Also, the fit and relative position of multi-stakeholder initiatives with regards to the rest of private sector interventions was another thing that intrigued me.

Fortunately for me, the new Private Sector Coordinator was very enthusiastic about this research project. Almost immediately after his appointment as Private Sector Coordinator, he began working with me in drafting the research plan for our next inquiry. Shortly after, when I presented him with the idea of analyzing a wider array of private sector interventions and the Program's general theory of change, he became very optimistic about the project and asked the rest of the Team to actively participate in this new cycle of research.



PART IV

Uncovering core competencies and critical issues: Oxfam's private sector intervention portfolio

A shorter version of this part of the book was published in:

Pesqueira L. & J. Verburg (2012). NGO-Business Interaction for Social Change: Insights from Oxfam's Private Sector Programme, *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* 15, Special Issue B, 133 – 138.
<https://www.ifama.org/publications/journal/vol15/V15IB.aspx>

26. Uncovering Private Sector engagement as a NGO intervention strategy

I had been with Oxfam Novib for eighteen months already and I had had plenty of chances to observe how practitioners went about managing Oxfam's interaction with the private sector, both externally and internally. While some things looked pretty straight forward, others did not. For instance, one of the Private Sector Program elements that I found to be less clear within the organization was what Oxfam called a *multi-faceted approach*. Generally speaking, this meant that there was no one particular approach that Oxfam took towards engaging the private sector. Rather, Oxfam's private sector work involved a combination of intervention strategies that ranged from collaborative to adversarial and everything in between.

Attending the Private Sector Team meeting every month, I listened to the common struggles faced by practitioners when trying to define and explain what the multi-faceted approach consisted of. Although the elements of such approach were sometimes difficult to grasp, practitioners identified the multi-faceted approach as the cornerstone of the Private Sector Program's identity. This lack of clarity, however, often rendered the interpretation of the multi-faceted approach unclear.

The study of Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil had provided me with important insights on how Oxfam contributed to the articulation of rights-based approaches in private governance arrangements. As I explained in the previous part of this book, Oxfam's decade-long involvement in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil combined strategic with opportunistic behavior, as well as outsider and insider advocacy approaches. The analysis of this particular private sector intervention also showed how Oxfam contributed to connecting global and local interests, in addition to including social principles in private regulation.

Oxfam's Private Sector Team considered that the articulation of rights-based principles in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil had been largely successful. But what was that the case in other private sector interventions? Was Oxfam's experience in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil representative of the larger Private Sector Program? And more important, how did Oxfam use private sector engagement as a strategy to systematically advance its development mission?

Reading about NGO-business engagement, I learned that it was around the mid-1990s when international NGOs began considering that a greater interaction with the private sector was needed to realize their objective. This was both in response to the limited capacity of the state to address the greater inequality created by the globalized economy, as well as to the increased attention given to corporate social responsibility.

However, collaboration with states and corporations posed important challenges for NGOs, especially in terms of maintaining their integrity, protecting their legitimacy, and avoiding being used to advance the objectives of governments or businesses, as well as ensuring that the interests of their constituents took precedence (see Lindenberg & Dobel, 1999). In the late 1990s, the senior team of ten global northern relief and development NGOs – including Oxfam – organized a conference to discuss the globalization of the NGO sector. In this meeting, a number of questions regarding the new role of NGOs emerged, including questions about their interaction with the private sector:

“First, when does it make sense to cooperate with the corporate sector and when might it be necessary to provide contravening pressure? Second, should criteria be developed about corporate conduct to help NGOs make more informed choices? Third, when partnerships do make sense, what are some of the most innovative models? Forth, when countervailing pressure is necessary, what examples of successful NGO initiatives might provide clues for how to proceed?” (Lindenberg & Dobel, 1999: 12).

Although some of these questions have been partially resolved, the increasingly complex environment in which NGOs currently operate has further complicated others. On the one hand, NGOs have accrued increasing influence and benefited from the process of globalization and communication technologies. This has given NGOs the possibility to operate simultaneously at various geographical scales, as well as to mobilize consumers across continents. Further, NGOs have undertaken new tasks related to the regulation of public affairs as they increasingly participate in the creation of hard and soft law together with governments and other societal actors.

But on the other hand, NGOs have also become subject of internal and external threats. Internally, NGO affiliates are forced to cope with new management models as confederations decentralize and to coordinate action across their growing international networks. Externally, NGOs need to account for cutbacks in state and private funding, along with the increased donor demands for evidence-based outcomes and the expanding demands from citizens, who regard NGOs as the primary overseers of corporate behavior.

In this scenario, management literature has extensively studied how firms benefit from alliances with NGOs and how they need to manage such relationships. From the corporate responsibility perspective, authors have explored the integration of responsibility criteria into core business operations through paying fair wages, creating sustainable or green supply chains, applying environmental policies and practices and developing new products and services (Dahan et al., 2010; Kourula & Halme, 2008; Visser, 2008; Zadek, 2006).

The field of the non-profit and NGO literature has also made important strides in this regard. Taking an actor perspective, some studies have focused on studying the architecture and functions of partnerships between NGOs and businesses (Austin, 2000; van Tulder, Muller, & de Boer D., 2004), while others have focused on the strategies that individual partners develop to cope with contesting demands in NGO-business relationships (Van Huijstee et al., 2007; van Huijstee et al., 2011). From an institutional perspective, scientists have looked at the new roles that NGOs play in global governance (Doh & Teegen, 2002; Glasbergen, 2010; Kamat, 2004).

NGO literature increasingly recognizes different types of NGOs. Among the most salient are community-based NGOs (CBOs), also called local NGOs; grassroots organizations (GROs); donor nongovernmental organizations (DONGOs); international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs); advocacy nongovernmental organizations (ANOs); development organizations (DOs), and many others (Vakil, 1997). Oxfam falls into the category of international NGOs, which have been defined as: “...more or less authoritative transnational bodies employing limited resources to make rules, set standards, propagate principles, and broadly represent ‘humanity’ vis-à-vis states and others actors” (Boli & Thomas, 1997: 172). Their work is built on the principles of universalism, individualism, rational voluntaristic authority, progress, and world citizenship.

Once engaged in relationships built on opposition and fundraising logics, firms and NGOs are currently more interested in forming long-term collaborative relations. And the case of Oxfam is not exclusive in this regard. In the last years, Oxfam has strived to generate better-informed policy of how to engage with different types of firms, creating partnerships to help realize its mission. In my interactions with the Private Sector Team, I was exposed to many of the struggles they

commonly face. These discussions revealed the importance of having effective internal sense- and decision-making processes, which could serve to elaborate better engagement strategies.

These observations led me to consider the ways in which I could capture and analyze the wide range of private sector interventions in an organized manner. When I started exploring these ideas, one of my supervisors suggested that I looked into the concept of *portfolio analysis*. When I first began reading about portfolios, I found the concept rather arid and rigid. It was until I saw some of its more practical applications that I was able to gauge the analytical potential of portfolio analysis.

As an analytical tool, portfolio analysis could help me analyze in more depth the range of interventions that made up the Private Sector Program, as well as the extent to which such interventions served Oxfam's strategic goals. By studying a portfolio of interventions, both individually and collectively, I hoped to uncover the ways in which Oxfam Novib applied and managed a multi-faceted engagement with the private sector.

27 ■ Constituting Oxfam's Private Sector intervention portfolio

Portfolios have been regarded as “powerful strategic weapons” (Meskendahl, 2010: 87) that have the potential to function as a central building block in strategy implementation. The simultaneous management of a collection of projects can deliver benefits by assisting in the evaluation, prioritization, and selection of projects that are in line with the strategy of the organization.

Portfolio theory first emerged in the 1950s within the sphere of financial investment as a mechanism for reducing risk. Since then, the concept of portfolio has been applied to a wide range of areas including strategic management, marketing, customer relationships, supplier relations, and new product development (Gok, 2009). Portfolio analysis is a flexible concept that can be applied from a number of perspectives, at various levels of aggregation, and with different variables or components depending of the objectives. The central goal of portfolio models is achieving balance, closely followed by effective resource allocation and creation of value related to relationships.

A portfolio model that seemed to be of particular relevance for analyzing Oxfam's private sector interventions is the relational portfolio model. Relationship portfolios traditionally aim for a balanced combination of relationships in the consumer base that serves the firm's long-term profitability (Terho & Halinen, 2007).

In marketing, especially, the development and management of relationships is central, and portfolio analysis has served as a tool to manage relationships at the strategic and tactical levels. In this field, extensive research has been conducted in the area of customer management, particularly in relation to the rise of relational approaches in marketing (Gok, 2009). Here, customer portfolio studies have looked into how companies group accounts or customers in order to make their relationships more efficient and balanced.

Worth noting is the fact that the portfolio concept is used here in a more metaphorical way than it is used in much of the business or financial modeling literature. In this study, I opted for portfolio analysis to serve as analytical devise due to its flexible nature and variable practice, where various methods such as matrixes and networks can be employed. Even though some people have argued that portfolio models offer a simplified view of reality that overlooks the interconnectedness of businesses, I found that portfolio analysis offered good prospects to organize and analyze Oxfam's Private Sector interventions.

I gathered data for this study over a period of one year through a collection of methods that included literature research, internal document analysis at Oxfam, participation in the work place, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations with practitioners directly involved Oxfam's Private Sector Program, as well as some external organizations. The interviews lasted about one hour, during which the discussions were kept broad in order to obtain rich data. Fundamental to this process was the use of multiple collection methods, which allowed for the triangulation of data.

The first step towards constituting a portfolio of private sector interventions was to select a representative sample. Because of Oxfam's matrix management structure, private sector interventions were managed by up to four different departments: international projects

department, fundraising and marketing, lobby and advocacy, and knowledge and program management. This meant that obtaining information about *all* Private Sector-related interventions of the past decade would be virtually impossible. To overcome this, I used stratified random sampling to select 64 representative Private Sector interventions and I validated the selection with the Private Sector Team (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

Accordingly, I categorized the available interventions into a number of groups, or strata, grouping cases that shared particular characteristics. For this purpose, I created strata based on Oxfam's five official types of intervention strategies – regulation, advocacy, partnerships, fundraising, and doing business – and then selected jointly with practitioners, a number of cases that were representative of each stratum. Overall, the sample of 64 interventions is representative of the whole population of Private Sector interventions at Oxfam Novib (see Annex B for a full overview of the sample).

28. Bridging the expectations of scientists and practitioners

One of the first challenges I faced when I started gathering data for the portfolio analysis was deciding what information to include and what to leave out. Looking to select the *right* private sector interventions in the portfolio, I exchanged ideas with a few members of the Private Sector Team at Oxfam Novib. When I presented practitioners with the idea of portfolios some found it difficult to understand. My impression was that they were used to working with other concepts, such as toolbox, charts, comparative studies, and evaluations. The introduction of a new concept seemed threatening, as it was something complicated and unknown. In this vein, some practitioners suggested that I made a toolbox instead.

Looking back at that moment and the research process as a whole, I dare to say that practitioners found the idea of portfolio analysis threatening not so much for intellectual reasons, but rather for more intuitive ones. I sensed that they were afraid that the process of creating the portfolio would take a long time and effort, demanding too much from them. At that moment, though, the only argument that I could think of for appeasing their concerns was that this type of analysis would provide with new insights about the assumptions of business engagement and the place of human rights therein. It took me some time, but eventually I could see that I had managed to convince some people. Even if others wished that the research process were simpler and faster.

A couple of months later, when I was collecting data around Oxfam Novib, I became frustrated when a member of the Private Sector Team, whom I thought would be particularly interested in my project, suggested that I should do something completely different. According to her, research of the sort that I was doing had already been done before and I should instead have focused on evaluating the effectiveness of private certification schemes on the ground, that is, to measure the extent to which they brought actual benefits to people living in poverty. Of course I agreed that was a priority and someone should look into it, but I was not the person to do so; my research was not focused on *that* kind of effectiveness. Or, wait a minute, should it? Maybe I had been focusing on the wrong issues all along.

After speaking with her, I went back to my desk and stared outside the window for a while. I looked again into the studies that had been conducted before on private sector work and they were only a couple of evaluations of multi-stakeholder initiatives done by consultants five years earlier. How was that similar to what I was trying to do? When I talked again with the Private Sector Coordinator, I discussed my hesitation with him. I was struggling to get some of the members of the Private Sector Team involved in my research project and to keep them motivated. Some of them kept telling me that they found my research project to be too “scientific” and “abstract”.

Once I was fully into the data analysis process, I gave a presentation about it to my colleagues at Utrecht University. The discussion that followed my presentation was not easy. After a round of questions about the fundamentals of my research project – the action research approach, the explicit focus on the role of the researcher, the style of writing, the validity of the results, the scientific relevance of the project – we moved on to discussing the portfolio analysis in greater detail.

Feeling a little less motivated, I could not help but wonder why I so often had to defend my project. Neither the practitioners nor the scientists seemed to get it. Perhaps something about it was actually wrong. My mind became fixed on this for the rest of the meeting. I tried to appear calm and agreeable, while I made notes of their suggestions, but I could not wait for the meeting to be over.

Thinking about the situation later, I realized I felt as if I was at the crossfire between two groups of people, none of which seemed satisfied with the approach and results of my research. A few weeks before, when I had presented the results of the study on Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil during a Private Sector meeting, practitioners had not been very welcoming of the terminology and perspective used. What was worse, I had not been able to present the information in a way that was more attractive and relevant for them. At Utrecht University, I had faced the opposite problem. During my presentation, one of my colleagues mentioned that my portfolio analysis seemed more like the work of a consultant than a scientist. I opted not to take offense in that remark, but rather figure out a way to overcome the situation.

I figured that what was happening was simply that the cognitive distance between the two groups was larger than I had anticipated. Cognition usually denotes people's perception, sense making, categorization, inferences, value judgments, and emotions, which build on each other. In the case of organizations, people need to share an interpretation system or organizational focus requiring them to sufficiently align their values, competencies, and motives. The shared fundamental categories of perception, interpretation, and evaluation go on to constitute what is known as organizational culture (Nooteboom et al., 2007).

Although the NGO and academic camps are involved in making sense of the implications of NGO-business interactions in the context of sustainable development, they each have different lenses through which they conceptualize a particular issue. Accordingly, the parameters that they employ in deeming which research questions are valid and appropriate differ too.

Trying to change the view of any of these two groups was not the solution. After all, a certain degree of cognitive distance between groups or people is positively correlated to innovation performance. When people with different knowledge and perspectives interact, they may stimulate each other to stretch beyond their boundaries for the purpose of connecting knowledge. The result is a positive effect on learning by interaction. When cognitive distance becomes as large so as to preclude sufficient mutual understanding, or as small so as to create a situation of familiarity, the innovative potential of any collaboration becomes hampered.

I wanted to find a way to bridge the cognitive distance between the practitioners at Oxfam and the scientists at Utrecht University. That is, to use communication to "make someone else make sense of the sense one makes of the world" (Nooteboom, 2000: 73). To this end, I decided on two strategies. Regarding Oxfam, I realized that for my research to be useful for the organization, I would need to present the information and the results in a different way. Otherwise, my thesis would not be of any use to their activities and their more strategic endeavors.

After juggling with this dilemma for a while, I came up with a double idea: The Private Sector Program would celebrate its 10th anniversary of its creation in 2013. The first idea was to *translate* the results from my research into a report or dossier that presented the general strategy of the Program, the lessons learned, and a vision for the future as a way to commemorate the anniversary. When I presented this idea to the Private Sector Program Coordinator, he welcomed it, also suggesting that my collaboration contract with Oxfam became extended six more months until the end of 2012.

As a second idea, I opted to look for ways to better communicate with both academics and practitioners, while simultaneously securing my position as researcher. For this, I concentrated on emphasizing the functional benefits offered by portfolio analysis to both groups:

- Portfolios help to tell something about the identity of an organization. What is important and why. In the case of Oxfam, private sector engagement as a change strategy and the role of the rights-based approach.
- Portfolios help to ensure the consistency with which organizational identity unfolds through the action repertoire of an organization, in this case, the multi-faceted approach that Oxfam takes to interacting with the private sector.
- Portfolios serve as a decision-making and communication tool. The simultaneous management of a collection of projects can deliver benefits by assisting in the evaluation, prioritization, and selection of projects that are in line with the strategy of the organization. In the case of Oxfam, designing a portfolio helps to ensure a strategic fit between the Private Sector interventions and the overall mission of the organization.

Further, I found inspiration on how to better communicate to different audiences in books written by anthropologists, but aimed for the general public. *“The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut”* written by Nigel Barley and *“Running with the Kenyans: Discovering the Secrets of the Fastest People on Earth”* by Adharanand Finn are two books that particularly inspired me. These books tell the accounts of (action?) researchers who set out to study a particular group of people – the Dowayo tribe in Cameroon and the world’s fastest runners in Kenya, respectively – and then managed to communicate their findings in a variety of ways to different audiences.

29. **Reconstructing Oxfam's private sector theory of change and identifying core competencies**

The principles that guide the Private Sector work in Oxfam are discussed in various internal policy documents. These guidelines set boundaries for Oxfam's interaction with the private sector and mention the different ways in which Oxfam can engage with companies around its development interventions. In addition to the institutional policy captured in such documents and strategic plans, members of the Private Sector Team often spoke of a *theory of change* when they tried to encapsulate their vision about how Oxfam's work could affect private sector behavior and steer it towards more socially and environmentally responsible practices.

Theories of change are a common element of NGO programs. They are conceptual representations that express how program or project teams conceive how to move from a specific existing situation towards a desired end. Theories of change are made up of the worldviews and underlying assumptions that teams have of a change process and their vision for the future (Tembo, 2012). Accordingly, assessing theories of change is critical in testing an organization's initial assumptions as reality unfolds. Theories of change help teams to reflect and learn systematically from good practices that can be replicated in different contexts, as well as from failed interventions.

While some organizations make theories of change explicit right from the start of a project, Oxfam's Private Sector Team did not do so. However, both explicit and implicit theories of change can be reconstructed and analyzed using methods to trace and reformulate the total of assumptions underlying a program or policy theory. In order to do this, I used the approach discussed by policy scientists (Hoogerwerf, 1990; Leeuw, 2003; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freemant, 2003) to analyze five key (confidential) policy documents:

- *Strategic framework for engaging multi-stakeholder initiatives*, Oxfam Novib (2009).
- *Actor strategy Private Sector*, Oxfam Novib (2003 and updated in 2010).
- *Toolkit/Webdossier Private Sector Programme*, Oxfam Novib (2011).
- *Guidance and tools for Private Sector Work*, Oxfam International (2013).
- *Propositional Statement on the Private Sector*, Oxfam International (2014).

Additionally, I conducted interactive interviews with nine members of the Private Sector Team. I used the information gathered through the interviews and the document analysis to create a number of goal trees and diagrams to build an overall picture of the structure and pattern of relationship between goals and means, causes and effects, norms and expected situations that served to guide private sector engagement. I created a model of the theory of change from successive approximation of drafts that I refined together with practitioners. The final model was discussed with the rest of the Private Sector Team during one of the monthly meetings.

From my analysis, I was able to conclude that Oxfam's private sector theory of change was grounded on three main elements:

1. *Viewing the poverty problem through a Human Rights lens*: This refers to the way in which Oxfam frames its view of the world and the problem of poverty. Framing reality from a

Human Rights perspective implies that Oxfam conceptualizes social problems in terms of the violation or protection of specific rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also implies that societal actors will be perceived as either rights-holders – who are not able to enact full rights – or duty-bearers – who are obligated to fulfil the holder’s rights. From this perspective, Oxfam’s mission is to strengthen the capacity of duty bearers to protect and respect rights, and to offer remedy in cases of violation, as well as to empower the rights holders to claim and enact their rights.

2. *Identifying the private sector as a duty-bearer:* Given Oxfam’s rights-based view of the world, Oxfam identifies the private sector as a duty-bearer. In this scenario, governments are not the sole actors responsible for bearing duties to protect human rights; businesses also have a role to play. Therefore, Oxfam engages with the private sector to strengthen the capacity of firms to respect human rights and offer alternative avenues for remedy.
3. *Developing organizational core competencies to engage with the private sector:* In order to materialize a rights-based approach to poverty eradication based on private sector engagement, Oxfam has had to develop specific organizational competencies. It is these competencies, that constitute the backbone of the Private Sector Program and which determine, to a large extent, the type of interventions that Oxfam employs to strengthen the capacities of duty-bearers and rights-holders.

Next, allow me to explore these three elements in more detail in order to uncover what they entail and what their implications are for Oxfam’s practice.

Oxfam views the problem of poverty through the lens of Human Rights

For Oxfam the policy problem of poverty is a consequence of injustice and the inability of people to realize their human rights. Poverty and injustice is understood to stem directly from current liberal economic policies and the lack of incentive and regulatory frameworks that include fair competition and just distribution. Unfair economic models that allow an uneven accumulation of wealth and power, together with the privatization of basic services, result in the exclusion of social groups in economic decision-making. Above all, Oxfam conceptualizes Private Sector interventions in terms of their impact on the realization of the right to sustainable livelihoods and the right to social and political participation.

By looking at poverty and injustice through the lens of human rights, the process of development turns into a political matter, burdening private parties with a number of social responsibilities that they would otherwise not have. In this scenario, Oxfam is committed to building the capacity of duty-bearers to uphold human rights.

Although traditionally governments were identified as the primary duty-bearers, Oxfam recognizes the power and influence increasingly displayed by private entities and, thus, works to strengthen the duty-bearing capabilities of businesses, NGOs, and civil society groups. In parallel, Oxfam also works to support rights-holders in demanding that duty-bearers meet their obligations. From this perspective, individuals are not passive recipients

Right to Sustainable Livelihoods

The Private Sector Program works to improve the productivity, of both land and labor; diversifying production; and looking for ways to add value through processing whenever possible. It means access to credit and other financial services, which can help to grow small businesses. It means helping the poor, particularly women, to retain a greater share of the final value of products, by improving their access to markets, and achieving a fairer balance of power between buyer and seller (Oxfam Novib, 2011).

of interventions; rather, they are rights-holders with expectations about interventions and their manner of delivery.

Taking an approach to development based on human rights implies using a conceptual framework that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. In addition, rights-based approaches involving the Private Sector provide process requirements for countervailing powers to be heard in the context of economic decision-making. In terms of process, participation and the inclusiveness of otherwise disenfranchised groups should be assured and supported. In turn, inclusivity should be non-discriminatory and empowering.

Right to Social and Political Participation

The Private Sector Program mobilizes political and practical support for marginalized people so that they can demand their right to participate in, or influence, decisions that affect their lives, and to demand accountability and transparency from decision-makers (Oxfam Novib, 2011).

Non-discrimination in this context refers to the availability and accessibility that groups of society have to benefits offered or created by the private sector; while empowerment entails shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across individuals and social groups. Empowerment, in the context of the Private Sector, is both a process and the result of a process in which prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural, and intellectual resources are challenged, as well as in which institutions and structures that reinforce and sustain social inequality are transformed.

Rights-based approaches also demand that private and public institutions be more transparent, open, and accountable. The principle of accountability demands not only that businesses become more accountable towards communities, but also that Oxfam is accountable to all its constituents: the rights-claimants, donors, partners, and the Oxfam International confederation.

Here, monitoring, setting targets and benchmarks, and considering contextual factors are suitable instruments for ensuring accountability. Similarly, reports, audits, ombudsmen, truth commissions, dispute settlement facilities, and complaint offices can help shed light on abuses and encourage transparency.

Oxfam identifies the Private Sector as bearer of duties

Oxfam views the private sector as an actor that is worth engaging with due to the political role it plays in both the creation and the alleviation of poverty. In a variety of roles as employer, buyer, and corporate citizen, the private sector can be a force for good and contribute to eliminating poverty and injustice. In this light, Oxfam identifies the private sector as an inclusive force for development and a potential ally to realize its mission.

Oxfam believes that economic growth, which takes place in an unrestrained market, does not contribute to the efficient and optimal allocation of resources. As a result, regulation becomes necessary, both within and beyond the state. Change is mostly likely to happen, Oxfam believes, through improving and increasing the rules that govern business behavior, as well as through better enforcing them.

From this perspective, efforts should be geared towards supporting existing regulatory frameworks that foster social development, as well as supporting the creation of private standards to regulate fields that would otherwise remain unaddressed. Here, voluntary regulation is viewed not as a substitute of formal regulation, but as a complementary option.

Oxfam develops core competencies to ensure responsibility in the Private Sector

Since the creation of the Private Sector Program in 2003, Oxfam has developed three particular strengths, constituting key elements of the Program's identity and serving as criteria in the selection of interventions. In management literature, core competencies have been illustrated as the roots of the organization (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Here, core competencies represent the collective learning in the organization and serve to harmonize projects and products in such a way that value is delivered. From this view, portfolios of products, or interventions in the case of NGOs, should be conformed and expanded from the perspective of core competencies instead of final products or users.

Accordingly, Oxfam Novib's engagement with the private sector is based on the following competencies:

- **Multi-faceted Approach:** Oxfam deems that contributions from the private sector to inclusive development and helping people to attain the right to a sustainable livelihood are best achieved by taking a flexible and wide-ranging approach to interacting with businesses. Oxfam pursues improved business behavior through a combination of interventions, ranging from critical to constructive approaches, voiced from insider and outsider positions.
- **Systemic Perspective:** Oxfam believes that systemic change is brought about by pushing for improvements, both at the global and local levels, in sectors that affect larger numbers of people living in poverty. For this, Oxfam works to realize mainstream transformation, targeting entire sectors or value chains rather than individual companies. Thus, paying special attention to consumer-facing brands, which are more susceptible to public and media boycotts.
- **Collaborative Outlook:** Oxfam's tactics and strategies are grounded on the realization that no societal sector can single-handedly eliminate injustice and the complex causalities of poverty. Governments, civil society, the private sector, and international institutions share the responsibility for ensuring the basic human development. Accordingly, Oxfam is prepared to interact, in positive spirit of open collaboration, with a wide range of actors from the public and private spheres.

In the next chapters of the portfolio study, I analyze Oxfam's private sector portfolio from the perspective of each of its core organizational competencies. From the perspective of Oxfam, I found that this approach could help to integrate diverse interventions and consider them from a more strategic perspective. In this way, focus can be placed on evaluating an intervention model as a whole, rather than looking at individual interventions. It is important to consider, however, that although portfolio implementation is a dynamic process, portfolio analysis is static. It usually consists of taking a picture of an array of elements, or interventions in this case, at a particular point in time.

30. ■ Engaging with firms in a multi-faceted way

Oxfam's primary competency is the deployment of a multi-faceted approach towards interacting with the private sector. This core competency is about process and refers to the way Oxfam goes about its private sector interventions. Accordingly, it asks how Oxfam seeks to bring about the desired changes in corporate behavior and the relevant regulatory frameworks. This competency is operationalized here in terms of the types of intervention strategies and action repertoires employed by Oxfam Novib.

Intervention strategies

The criterion of intervention strategies refers to the different institutionalized strategies that Oxfam uses to engage with the private sector, namely, regulation, partnership, fundraising, doing business, and advocacy.

Oxfam believes that economic growth, which takes place in an unrestrained market, does not contribute to the efficient and optimal allocation of resources. As a result, regulation becomes necessary, both within and beyond the state. According to Oxfam, change is mostly likely to occur by improving and increasing the regulatory frameworks that govern business behavior, as well as by better enforcing them. In this light, Oxfam engages with both binding and voluntary regulatory processes. Influencing governments or intergovernmental organizations is the preferred strategy when an entire sector or industry is targeted and structural issues are at stake. This is also applicable in cases in which the playing field is diverse or distorted, legislation is weak or absent, and where a government agency or instrument is the most relevant player.

Partnerships involve active collaboration with businesses, both at the level of projects in developing countries, with efforts geared towards involving smallholders in supply chains, brokering with market actors to increase support for small and medium enterprises, and investments in microfinance; and at the level of policy to include joint lobby and research efforts. In this regard, Oxfam considers that combined NGO-business initiatives can generate new learning and increase potential impact.

Compared to advocacy relationships, partnerships are usually co-branded, require considerable resources, and have longer-term commitment. This strategy is chosen when there is a clear mutual benefit for Oxfam and the corporate partner, which is usually a frontrunner company in a particular sector and shows willingness to trigger changes in other firms, whether competitors or suppliers. In Oxfam's private sector portfolio, most partnerships are of the first type and are carried out in developing countries, largely through local NGOs and cooperatives.

Insider advocacy, on the other hand, takes the form of dialogue with businesses and is geared to help businesses that show willingness to change improve their policies and practices. Examples of this in the portfolio include strategic partnerships and sector-wide approaches through multi-stakeholder initiatives, like the creation of certification scheme in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO, 2009b).

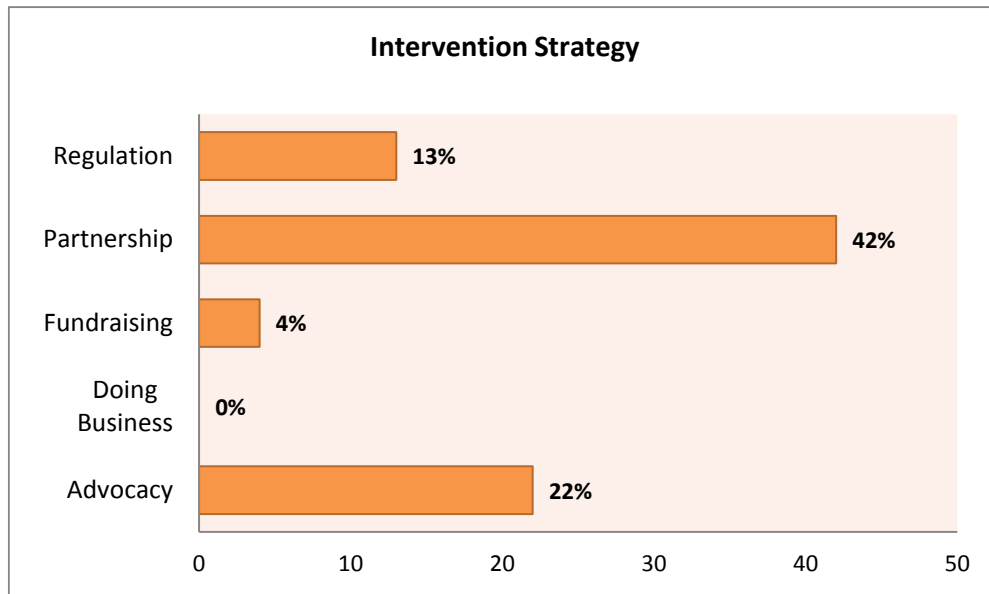


FIGURE 5: PRIVATE SECTOR INTERVENTIONS GROUPED IN TERMS OF THE STRATEGY EMPLOYED

In terms of fundraising, Oxfam Novib's strategy involves obtaining corporate support, both in cash and in kind. It is only recently that Oxfam has opted for a more proactive approach to fundraising. Oxfam Novib no longer seeks relationships based on a sponsorship logic, but rather partnership formats in which companies are able to choose from different degrees of involvement, according to their objectives and capacity. These degrees include strategic funding partners, supporting partners, media partners, suppliers, and company ambassadors.

In particular, strategic funding partners must help further Oxfam's mission and grant at least €300.000 (Three hundred thousand) annually. Some examples include companies like SCA, Philips, and Start-People. The company ambassadors program currently includes 600+ small-medium enterprises in the Netherlands which contribute between €200 and €800 per month to Oxfam in exchange for policy expertise and the right to use Oxfam's logo in specific company actions.

Additionally, the doing business strategy conceives of Oxfam as a private actor, both as a consumer and an entrepreneur with the power to procure and supply responsibly-produced goods and services, contributing to the creation of new markets. At present, Oxfam Novib uses considerably less frequently the strategies of fundraising and doing business than the rest of the intervention strategies. However, changes in donor policies, coupled with the global recession, are demanding Oxfam Novib to take a more entrepreneurial approach to resource acquisition.

Action repertoires

Another important characteristic of Oxfam's multi-faceted approach has to do with the diversity of action repertoires, which allows Oxfam to sustain both collaborative and adversarial engagements with the private sector. This combination of advocacy action repertoires allows Oxfam to publicly collaborate with firms, while remaining free to campaign against them. Oxfam's assumption in this regard is that taking an approach solely based on incentives would attract only businesses that are interested in profiting from their public image. Contrary to this, taking an approach exclusively aimed at threatening corporate reputation would prevent Oxfam from forging more integrative relationships with front-runner companies.

As an advocacy tactic, Oxfam often chooses to combine insider and outsider approaches. This is specially the case in multi-stakeholder collaborative arrangements in which Oxfam acts as a watchdog, pressuring the private sector to make commitments and ensuring transparency and accountability in the collaborative process. Combining insider and outsider approaches demands a higher degree of coordination with other actors and a more systematic management of risks.

Oxfam has increasingly relied on this type of coordination, as the cases studied in Part II of this book, regarding Oxfam's involvement in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, and Part V on the creation of the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues show. Particularly in Part V of the book, the implications of balancing the two types of action repertoires are more thoroughly discussed.

Overall, it is in fewer cases, that Oxfam Novib employs an explicit outsider, i.e., confrontational, strategy. The case of the Roundtable on Responsible Soy, a multi-stakeholder arrangement in which Oxfam does not participate, is a case in point. Controversies regarding the production of soy – typically monoculture, in large-scale and industrialized plantations, using genetically modified seeds –, coupled with the little attention paid in the standard to land rights, social and environmental impacts, dissuaded local civil society organizations in Argentina and Brazil, two of the largest soy producing countries, from participating in the Roundtable for Responsible Soy.

This lack of support for the initiative, along with the fact that other key interests of Oxfam were not accounted for in the proceedings and standard of the Roundtable on Responsible Soy, precluded Oxfam from taking part in the initiative. Oxfam believes that without active engagement of local civil society organizations, multi-stakeholder initiatives of this kind are bound to be imbalanced and prone to serve business interests.

In this scenario, Oxfam opted to intervene in the Roundtable for Responsible Soy from an outsider position, taking a “critical, yet constructive role”. From this position, Oxfam's strategy consists of supporting watchdog local civil society organizations and communities that act as countervailing powers to the soy barons in decision-making processes where they can claim their rights and promote food justice. Additionally, Oxfam Novib provides financial support to the development of constructive, research- and fact-based critiques on the social and environmental impacts of large-scale soy production.

31. Pushing for systemic change

The core competency of systemic perspective refers to the scope of Oxfam Novib's private sector interventions. In terms of scope or coverage, the portfolio analysis offers insights in terms of the level of interventions, the prioritized objective-areas, and the preferred mechanism to bring about social change.

Level of intervention

Oxfam Novib aims to realize mainstream, systemic transformation and, for this purpose, it intervenes at three different levels: the global, the local (in developing countries), and at home (The Netherlands). In the Netherlands, Oxfam sustains dialogue and campaigns with Dutch companies that are often leaders in their sectors, like Philips, Unilever, and Rabobank.

With respect to the local level, Oxfam estimates that small and medium enterprises in developing countries also play an important role in local development, thus supporting the creation of local value chains involving small farmers that produce commodity products, seeds, and nuts; as well as supporting organizations of pastoralists, herders, and craftsmen in developing countries like Burundi, Niger, Rwanda, and Vietnam. Through these development projects coordinated by Oxfam's international department, Oxfam aims to build or shape alternative pro-poor business models and to open up opportunities for smallholders in local markets, usually in collaboration with other development NGOs and international donors that pursue similar objectives.

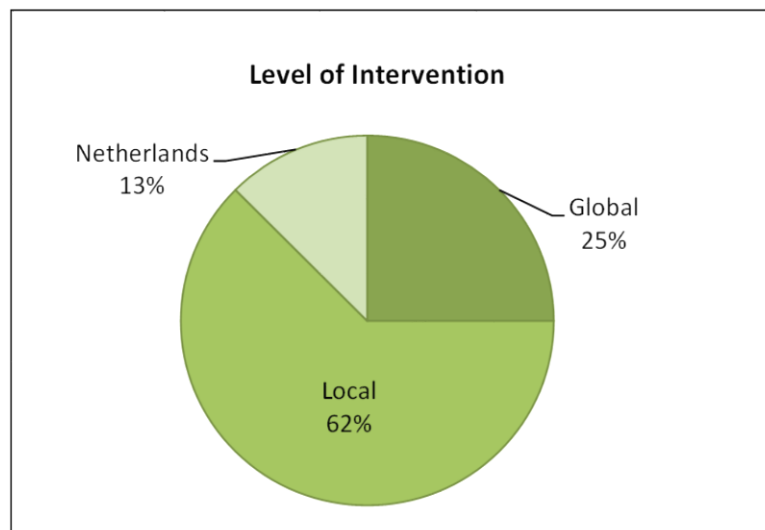


FIGURE 6: PERCENTAGE OF INTERVENTIONS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT IN THE NETHERLANDS, IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (LOCAL) AND AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

At the global level, Oxfam's Private Sector interventions often target multinational firms operating in commodity sectors. The objective in these cases is to affect irresponsible corporate policy and practices in whole sectors, in order to reduce their negative impacts on the livelihood

of people and the environment. Often, this is done through global advocacy interventions including, public campaigns; the creation of rankings, like Behind the Brands (Oxfam International, 2014a) and the Access to Medicines Index (Access to Medicines Index, 2012), which rank companies' efforts to improve corporate performance; in addition to participation in multi-stakeholder certification initiatives, like the Roundtable for a Sustainable Cocoa Economy (RSCE, 2009).

Intervention objective-areas

Regarding the objective-areas, Oxfam has prioritized private sector interventions around markets, rules, knowledge, and empowerment. All of Oxfam's private sector interventions address one or more of these four intervention objectives. True to the rights-based approach, the majority of private sector interventions pursue objectives related to achieving or improving social organizations, gender, and empowerment aspects (61% of total interventions).

In general terms, these interventions are aimed towards giving stakeholders, notably those that would otherwise be easily excluded, a voice in making decisions on issues that have an effect on their livelihood, such as decent work conditions and access to natural resources. The struggle for human rights is more sustainable when groups of people are organized under a common identity and a collective agenda. Oxfam works to support the creation of such movements in various developing countries, particularly women's groups, and to assist their participation in political arenas.

In terms of social organizations, gender, and empowerment objectives, two types of interventions are particularly relevant. First, partnership interventions supporting local producers in countries like Angola, Burundi, Indonesia, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Uganda, and Vietnam. And second, Oxfam's participation in the creation or implementation of voluntary regulatory and advocacy multi-stakeholder schemes like the Access to Medicines Index, Fair Banking Guide, Green Santa Campaign, and the Tropical Commodity Coalition (see Access to Medicines Index, 2012; Fair Banking Guide, 2014; Green Santa Campaign, 2014; TCC, 2009).

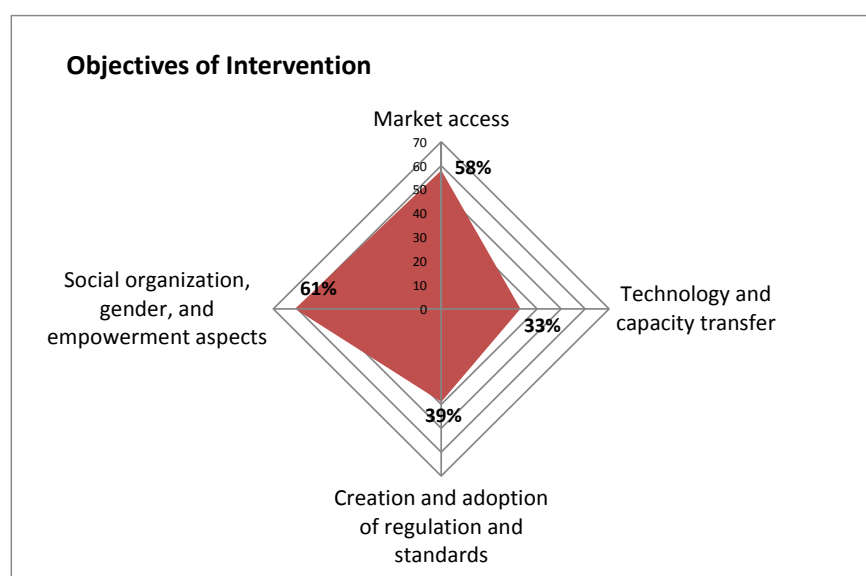


FIGURE 7: PERCENTAGE OF INTERVENTIONS DEDICATED TO SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

Further, interventions about markets (58% percent of total) include both actions at the local and global levels. At the local level, examples include improving the productivity of farmers in developing countries and providing them with access to local value chains for crops like maize, rice, beans, cashew nuts, sesame, and peanuts. At the global level, Oxfam takes action to promote the regulation of sectors through voluntary standards, which can complement formal regulatory frameworks.

Such interventions have been carried out to promote the creation and adoption of private certification systems for sectors like coffee, cocoa, tea, and palm oil; as well as to mobilize consumer demand for sustainably produced products. To a lesser extent, and more in a supportive role, Oxfam's Private Sector Program also pursues initiatives around sharing expertise, transferring technology, and mobilizing innovative networks to bring continuous improvement in entire sectors.

Preferred change mechanisms

In terms of Oxfam's preferred mechanisms to bring about social change, the portfolio analysis revealed that while Oxfam accepts using the market as a coordinating mechanism, it also strongly advocates for a regulation of the market and the behavior of private actors. In this sense, Oxfam considers that soft law in the form of private standards or codes of conducts, developed collaboratively with other private actors, can help fill governance voids which are not addressed by available formal regulatory instruments.

Businesses are thus motivated to participate in the creation and adoption of production standards, particularly in those that explicitly aim to address the social impacts of business activities. Efforts in this arena are geared towards supporting existing regulatory frameworks that foster social development (e.g. OECD Guidelines, Global Reporting Initiative, Equator Principles), as well as supporting the creation of novel private standards (e.g. Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, Aquaculture Stewardship Council, Code of Conduct for the Coffee Community) that aim to regulate novel activities or situations that would otherwise remain unaddressed. In general, Oxfam views voluntary regulation not as a substitute of formal regulation, but as a complementary option that can help strengthen corporate policy, as well as formal regulatory frameworks.

32. Collaborating with others to realize organizational objectives

The core competency of collaborative outlook considers the fact that Oxfam does not pursue private sector interventions individually. Rights-based approaches to development require that local organizing, alliance building, and networking are pursued as key means to challenge power imbalances. Accordingly, this dimension is operationalized in terms of the nature of the relationships sustained between Oxfam and other like-minded actors in the context of private sector interventions, as well as on the roles most frequently played by Oxfam in this context.

Nature of collaboration

Regarding Oxfam's Private Sector Program, forging and sustaining relationships with local NGOs in developing countries comprise more than half of the cases (52%) in the portfolio. In some countries, Oxfam works with local partner NGOs to help organize farmer organizations and build or shape alternative pro-poor business models that open up opportunities for smallholders in local markets. Here, Oxfam frequently supports the implementation of value chain projects aimed at creating local businesses in developing countries, particularly female-run enterprises.

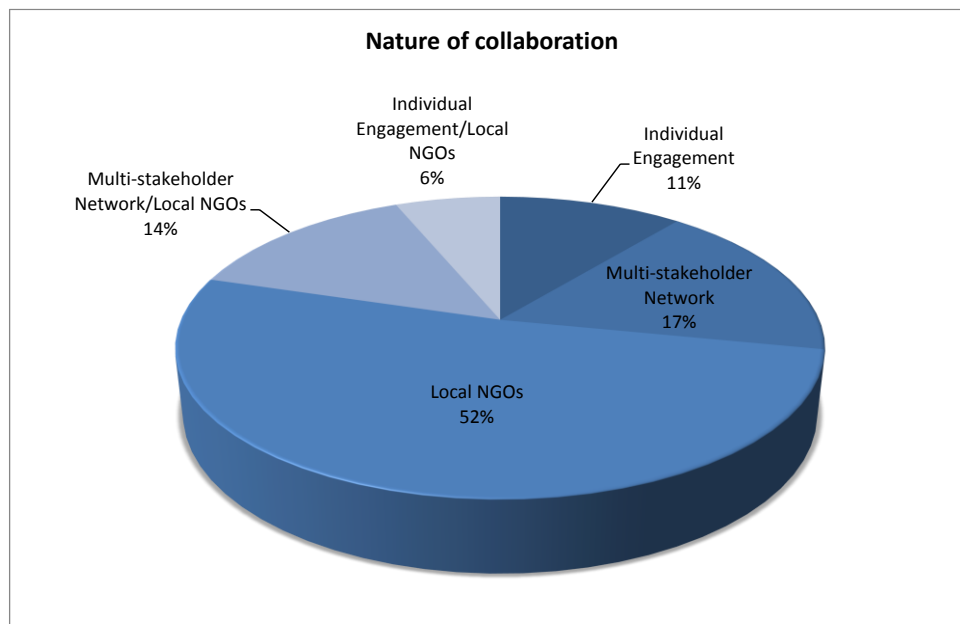


FIGURE 8: TYPES OF STAKEHOLDERS WITH WHICH OXFAM COLLABORATES TO REALIZE ITS OBJECTIVES

Oxfam's private sector work at global level is also carried out in conjunction with international networks or coalitions of like-minded actors. In some of these cases, Oxfam's role involves supporting the organization and consolidation of such networks, or brokering relationships

between network members. In some cases, Oxfam goes as far as sustaining simultaneous relationships with multi-stakeholder international networks and local NGOs (14% of the cases).

Oxfam Novib's role in these cases usually involves facilitating exchanges between both groups, helping to create an enabling environment in which rights-holders can develop a collective identity, elaborating an agenda for policy change, and linking up to other groups or networks pursuing similar goals.

Oxfam takes part in and supports international coalitions, such as North-South NGO alliances and global action networks, because they offer possibilities for better managing complex problems at different scales. From the perspective of empowerment, for instance, Oxfam estimates that these coalitions allow less powerful groups to be better positioned against the more powerful actors, as I elaborated on more extensively in Part III of this book. Specifically, the formation of alliances and coalitions serves to mobilize resources and strengthen the capacities of specific social groups in relation to the private sector.

Roles played by Oxfam

Oxfam plays simultaneous roles when partnering with other like-minded actors in the context of private sector interventions. In its capacity as international donor, Oxfam provides funding to the majority of interventions in which it participates (80% of the total occasions). It also acts as intermediary in almost half of the cases (42%), brokering relationships between the representatives of NGOs, local communities, and the private sector.

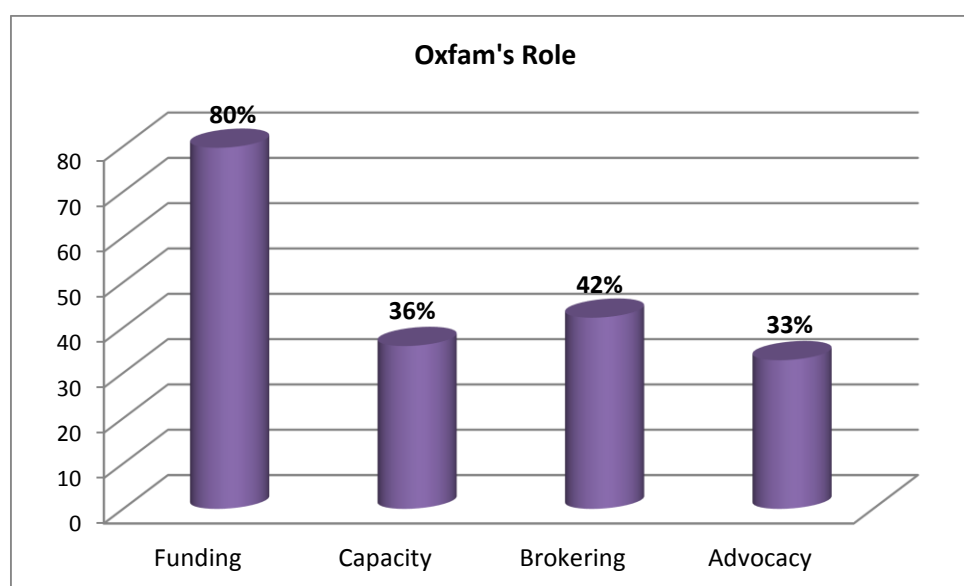


FIGURE 9: ROLES PLAYED BY OXFAM IN THE CONTEXT OF PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

Recurrently, Oxfam brings actors from different countries or sectors together, opening up communication between them and linking local NGOs and farmer groups to innovative networks and existing international financing institutions. The role of capacity building involves providing information and knowledge to members of the partnerships, carrying out research on contested or under-explored issues such as gender mainstreaming and pesticide use, assisting local NGOs in the implementation of projects, etc.

During conversations with practitioners at Oxfam, I found that, in their view, brokering and influencing agendas, the latter related to Oxfam's advocacy role, are two of Oxfam's unique roles vis-a-vis the private sector. This is most likely due to Oxfam's capacity to link the local and global dimensions of the policy problem, as well as the actions of actors in the North and South.

33. Assessing the evolution of the private sector portfolio overtime

Before the Private Sector Program was created, the interaction between Oxfam and the private sector had been limited to campaigning and fundraising, which were usually conceived as mutually exclusive activities. With time, increased interaction with firms brought a third dimension to NGO-business relations, one of collaboration focused on increasing the social value of companies in the context of poverty reduction.

Since then, collaboration with the private sector has continued to evolve, drawing on novel and experimental approaches. This has resulted in Oxfam's multi-faceted approach, which ranges from strategic dialogue and one-on-one partnerships, to praising and shaming campaigns, participation in multi-stakeholder arrangements, and proactive fundraising. A document entitled *Private Sector Actor Strategy* documented and explained the major shifts experienced in the Private Sector Program between 2003 and 2009.

Analyzing Oxfam's private sector portfolio brought practitioners new evidence and insights about their work and how it had evolved over time. They considered that, in face of the tenth anniversary of the creation of the Private Sector Program, it was important to document how the Program had evolved, given the lessons learned and the influence of contextual factors. For my part, I considered that analyzing the evolution of the Program would help to give the portfolio analysis a more dynamic dimension, revealing the lively activity behind the rather static picture of the portfolio.

So, as part of my activities in the Private Sector Team, I helped to identify and analyze the most important developments in business engagement between 2003 and 2013. Namely:

Scope of engagement; from sectoral to multi-sectoral

When Oxfam Novib created the Private Sector Program in 2003, engagement with companies was thought as demanding a completely different engagement strategy from that with governments and civil society organizations or local NGOs in developing countries. Each group of actors was perceived to be a unique target that required specific engagement strategies. With time, this changed. Oxfam sought to engage in alliances that included actors from different spheres of society.

With this multi-sectoral approach, Oxfam changed its position from partner, to broker or intermediary, while also allowing a more differentiated approach to the private sector. Corporate frontrunners, followers, and blockers began to be identified and target in different ways. By 2012, Oxfam faced the increasingly blurred limits between the private and public sectors, as the interests of businesses and governments mix.

Currently, Oxfam's engagement with businesses expands to address novel issues, such as the creation of regulatory frameworks, greening supply chains, developing local markets, and ensuring the provision of basic services.

Focus of intervention; from dialogue to collaboration

In terms of interventions, Oxfam Novib initially focused on engaging in dialogue, cooperating, and forming partnerships with individual companies. This one-to-one interaction eventually shifted towards engaging with multiple businesses and organizations in platforms or networks and with Oxfam engaging in a wider-range of activities such as research, advocacy, fundraising, and campaigning.

Lately, Oxfam has focused on better aligning its different private sector interventions with its campaign goals (i.e. GROW) and thematic priorities (i.e. struggle for land and water, creation of fair markets and financial systems) (Oxfam International, 2014b). Additionally, as private actors like businesses and foundations increasingly gain clout, Oxfam seeks to focus on delivering more proactive – rather than reactive – formats to engaging with businesses.

Places of intervention; from home to specific parts of the world

Initially, most of Oxfam Novib's private sector advocacy strategies were aimed at changing the behavior of Dutch firms, particularly multinationals and banks. With time, it became necessary to broaden the scope to account for the impacts of business operations, private equity investment, and pension funds abroad. Currently, more and more interventions are geared towards linking the local and global dimensions of a sustainability problem. For instance, the Fair Banking Guide model, which was conceived in the Netherlands, has now been exported to Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Belgium, France, and Sweden (Fair Banking Guide, 2014).

In terms of projects in developing countries, the trend has been more or less the opposite. A decade ago, Oxfam Novib ran private sector related projects in as many as 60 developing countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. With the advent of the decentralization policy at Oxfam International in 2011 and the implementation of the Single Management Structure, Oxfam Novib closed all operations in Latin America and various other countries.

Under this management model, interventions in several developing countries are no longer coordinated from the Netherlands but in local offices, which are managed and financed by a specific Oxfam affiliate. For instance, in the countries of Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Egypt, Maghreb, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda, and Vietnam, Oxfam Novib is the Managing Affiliate, which means that it coordinates all of Oxfam affiliates' interventions in these countries. While in other countries, like Bangladesh, Burundi, Laos, Mali, Myanmar, Rwanda, Senegal, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe, Oxfam Novib serves as Implementing Affiliate under the Management of, say, Oxfam Great Britain or Oxfam America or Oxfam Hong Kong.

Agenda; from pragmatic to political

Oxfam Novib's private sector agenda has also changed with time. At the beginning the Program held mostly a pragmatic focus rooted in the Corporate Social Responsibility concept. Here, Oxfam sought to help companies develop a corporate responsibility vision and plan for improving their social and environmental performance. With time, though, Oxfam Novib adopted a more political attitude based on the rights-based profile of the organization. Accordingly, the focus became placed on demonstrating what the concept of corporate responsibility could contribute to the principles of accountability and transparency.

Over the last years, Oxfam has made great strides in achieving a balanced combination of political and pragmatic approaches aimed at retaining political power and reputation, while remaining

attractive to international donors. What I mean here, is that Oxfam has brought a political agenda to market-based initiatives involving the private sector. For instance, Oxfam has managed to articulate aspects of land and labor rights, as well as grievance mechanisms, in private sector interventions without being perceived as an opponent of the neoliberal system. Further, issues of monitoring, evaluation, learning, and profiting from quick wins have also been instrumental in advancing the more pragmatic face of the Private Sector Program.

Capacities and roles, from watchdog to critical insider

Oxfam's traditional approach to the private sector was to serve as watchdog, keeping track of firm behavior and denouncing unfair or unsustainable practices. Here, typical activities included problem analysis, agenda setting, and advocacy. Eventually, the Private Sector Program has developed more sophisticated capacities so that it can help businesses implement specific initiatives, while also strengthening expertise on complex rights-based issues, such as land, gender, labor, climate change, etc. With this, came a diversification of the roles played by Oxfam Novib, which currently include technical advisor, critical insider, broker, and facilitator.

Relationship with the private sector; from being too close to being better positioned

When Oxfam Novib began interacting more often and collaboratively with the private sector, some other Oxfam affiliates became very critical of Novib. According to them, Oxfam Novib was working too close to the private sector and thus risking its relationship with governments and international institutions.

To date, Oxfam Novib has consistently been a point of reference for private sector interventions in the confederation. Although the confederation still struggles to achieve a better integration of private sector interventions across affiliates, there is more cooperation between Novib and Oxfam America, Great Britain, Australia, Hong Kong in the creation of innovative advocacy tools like Poverty Footprints, Behind the Brands Campaign, and multi-stakeholder Initiatives (Green, 2014; Oxfam International, 2014a; Oxfam International, 2009).

34. **Revealing portfolio dynamics and identifying critical issues**

Once I had finished the portfolio analysis and I had presented the results to the Private Sector Team, I was able to identify some critical challenges that might put in risk the integrity of the Program. During my interaction with the Private Sector Team, I had often heard them talk about the challenges they faced when having to explain the different objectives and approaches pursued in the Private Sector Program. Most often, these aspects were discussed in an anecdotal way. Now, the results of the portfolio analysis offered clear evidence of these critical issues.

In order to validate the critical issues that I had identified during my analysis of Oxfam's private sector portfolio, I did a thorough revision of the notes I kept in my research journal, where I kept notes about conversations, interviews, and meetings with Oxfam practitioners, as well as with people from external organizations.

Using a coding technique, I identified the challenges or risks mentioned by practitioners and coded them in order to create categories of critical issues. The results of this process yielded four categories of issues, which I presented to the Private Sector Coordinator. Together with him, I elaborated the nature and implications of each category of critical issues, which include: loose creation of synergies between interventions, relying on market-based mechanisms to achieve political change, communicating a consistent organizational identity and image, and managing a multiplicity of relationships.

Loose creation of synergies between interventions

Program management goes beyond managing single projects. As Murray-Webster and Thiry put it, "A program is a collection of change actions (projects and operational activities) purposefully grouped together to realize strategic and/or tactical benefits" (2000: 48). From this perspective, one of the main responsibilities of the Private Sector Coordinator is to ensure internal coherence between the interventions in the portfolio and their contribution to achieving the strategic objectives of the Private Sector Program. After all, program management is a high profile approach to strategy implementation (Partington, Pellegrinelli, & Young, 2005).

My analysis of Oxfam's private sector portfolio revealed that, so far, most private sector interventions in Oxfam Novib have been managed from the perspective of a single project ambition, with a scope limited by time and budget constraints. The creation of synergies among private sector interventions has been rather inconsistent, as there is little connection between the different interventions in terms of the sectors and countries they address, the objective-areas pursued, and the partners involved. In particular, the competing aims of the different intervention strategies are difficult to reconcile.

For instance, Oxfam's Private Sector policy establishes that Oxfam is not allowed to raise funds from companies that are targeted in Oxfam's campaigns. This means that, in the Netherlands, the Fundraising and Marketing Team is not allowed to raise funds neither from Unilever nor Rabobank because they are targets in advocacy interventions like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and the Fair Banking Guide, respectively. This situation is worsened if we consider that this is applicable to all 13 Oxfam affiliates across Oxfam International. Often, this might prevent

Oxfam representatives from engaging in novel opportunities or result in one type of intervention being favored over another.

In the few cases in which synergy between interventions has been achieved, it has been largely due to opportunities raised by a member's expertise or relationships, and not due to a systematic approach to program management. Arguably, such fragmentation might be attributed to the fact that the members of the Private Sector Team belong to different departments and are subject to separate management lines.

Program management, however, is concerned with interdependencies between interventions or projects, so that change is achieved in a controlled way (van Buuren, Buijs, & Teisman, 2010). Accordingly, the objective of getting the private sector to adopt a more proactive role in social development will depend on the aggregated effects, and the mutual impact of, and synergies between, different private sector actions.

In my analysis of Oxfam's Private Sector portfolio, I was only able to identify a couple of examples that illustrate what such synergies could look like. Particularly in the cocoa sector, Oxfam has achieved good synergy in realizing advocacy activities across different levels of action (national, local, and global); linking it to various key Oxfam issue-areas (women, trade, agriculture, certification, etc); and with varying actors from society. This has been captured in a Background Paper that I wrote, together with a member of the Private Sector Team, as part of my activities at Oxfam Novib (see Annex A at the end of the book (*Cocoa Background Paper*) for a complete account). As the cocoa case shows, forging synergies across interventions, contributes to overcome portfolio fragmentation and to deploy more robust development interventions.

Relying on market-based mechanisms to achieve political change

The analysis of Oxfam's intervention portfolio revealed that most private sector interventions pursue changes in terms of social organization, tender, and empowerment (61% of total interventions), and providing access to local and global markets for small producers (58% of total interventions). While these two sets of objectives are not of contradictory per se, they do point towards a number of tensions brought about by Oxfam's reliance on market-based interventions to realize political transformation.

Taking a rights-based approach implies using a different lens for analyzing the nature of the problems of development, as well as exposing the hidden conditions and structures that create and tolerate poverty. In this light, human rights act as a heuristic and a planning device that helps to broaden the definition of the problems to be addressed, as well as the actions required to solve them. The value of Oxfam's rights-based approach to development lies in the fact that it focuses simultaneously on ends and means, demanding a development process that is participatory, accountable, transparent, equitable, and which originates from the empowerment of local people and their claims.

Oxfam engages with businesses with the assumption that the creation of new collaborative spaces might lead to more inclusive and equitable decision-making. And, while this might be the case to a certain extent, it is necessary to consider that, in the agri-food sector at least, the success of most collaborative initiatives will be largely judged according to the degree to which they are able to transform existing markets or create ones. In this scenario, matters of human rights will hardly be placed at the center of market-based governance initiatives.

It is true that some authors have argued that the market can provide an empowering institutional arena within which people might more easily realize their rights (Hinojosa-Valencia, 2009). From this view, the market, as a means to organize the distribution of resources and a route to

emancipation, might be considered desirable for development from a rights-perspective. However, the risk with this perspective lies on re-conceptualizing citizens as consumers, thus offering a narrow view of people being able to escape poverty and injustice as long as they are able to participate in and benefit from the global markets.

Somewhat contrary to this view, Oxfam's inherently political view of development assumes conflict and struggle as the means to deal with differences of power and assets between social actors. It is important to consider, however, that holding such a political approach to development might have significant implications, particularly in terms of NGO survival in more repressive regimes and in the face of apolitical or nonpartisan donors.

Accordingly, while focusing on the market becomes a good strategy for remaining attractive to donors and speaking the language of businesses, it might also result in a reinforcement of the existing neoliberal agenda through a limited focus on the rights to participate in markets, property, and individualism (Hickey & Mitlin, 2009a: 212). In this sense, explicitly acknowledging the limitations of market-based mechanisms to realize social transformation from a rights-based perspective is needed at all phases of private sector interventions.

After all, "Rights cannot be truly realized without changes in the structures and relationships of power in all their forms: changes in who makes decisions, in whose voice is heard, in what topics are seen as legitimate, in people's sense of relative self-worth, and in the confidence people have to speak out" (Chapman, 2009: 167).

Communicating a consistent organizational identity and image

Taking a multi-faceted approach to engaging with the private sector is one of the core competencies of Oxfam's Private Sector Program. This approach grants Oxfam with a wide room for maneuver, and the possibility to play several roles simultaneously, when engaging with businesses. Specifically, it offers Oxfam the possibility to make decisions about interventions in an ad hoc basis, with opportunities and risks being independently weighted.

However, Oxfam's multi-faceted engagement with the private sector has gone under scrutiny several times, as it can be easily misinterpreted as an inconsistent approach. Oxfam's mixing of local and global actions, combining insider and outsider profiles, and pursuing a rights-based agenda through market-based solutions, has created confusion among internal and external stakeholders. When looking at the results of the portfolio analysis, it is not possible to make a connection between Oxfam's interventions in developing countries, and those carried out in the Netherlands or at the global level. Similarly, the reasons why sometimes Oxfam chooses to combine insider and outsider action repertoires have not been made explicit neither in the Program's theory of change nor its intervention portfolio. In short, this lack of clarity obscures what the Private Sector Program does, how, and why.

One possible alternative to overcome this would be to increase and improve the communication of Oxfam's private sector activities and the most salient characteristics of the multi-faceted approach. This is particularly important in terms of safeguarding Oxfam's organizational identity and reputation. Organizational identity has been described as a collectively held frame within which organizational participants make sense of their world (Weick, 1995). In the case of NGOs, organizational identity is manifested through its repertoires of action; i.e., strategies, tactics, and interventions (Barkaso, 2010).

Communicating important elements of an organization's identity through discourses, campaigns, policy papers, and other meaning-laden actions has been found to have a significant effect on the formation of identity and image (Gioia, 1998). Currently, communication about private sector

intervention in Oxfam's website, its annual reports, and other publicly available documents is minimal. To correct this, more detailed communication towards employees, partners, donors, and the general public about the characteristics and implications of the multi-faceted approach, could go a long way in clarifying Oxfam's private sector model of change.

Managing a multiplicity of relationships

Oxfam's approach to the private sector enables the organization to raise funds from, collaborate with, and campaign against businesses. This implies having to manage a multiplicity of relationships, not only with the private sector, but also with other NGOs, international organizations, and governments. As the portfolio analysis showed, Oxfam Novib extensively interacts with local NGOs (52% of total interventions), but also with members of multi-stakeholder networks (17% of total) and with individual firms (11% of total).

Although Oxfam's private sector model of change is based on the core competency of collaboration with others, currently, only very few corporate or partner relationships are strategically managed and, in the majority of cases, there is no one particular person assigned to handling the relationship with a specific organization. Consequently, one person from Oxfam might contact a firm for fundraising and another for partnership purposes. In a similar way, a local NGO in, say, Indonesia might be Oxfam's partner in one initiative, its funding recipient in another, and its opponent in a third one.

Ensuring a more systematic management of corporate relationships would be a first step to dictate priorities for particular relationships, while discouraging others. An idea in this regard could be to establish a strategic account management system that would help to identify, invest, and manage stakeholder relationships with a long-term vision. The central objective in managing relationships in a strategic fashion is being able to integrate the interests of other stakeholder groups in a way that ensures the long-term realization of the organizational mission. In this vein, Oxfam could focus on strengthening value-adding and interdependent relationships with like-minded actors in a more systematic manner.

35. Concluding thoughts

Literature on program management advocates for the creation of frameworks that provide shape to the context in which interventions take place. Such frameworks provide reference for initiating, directing, and ending interventions. And more importantly, they help managers to assign shared resources, prioritize, and adjudicate between competing interventions or projects. The creation of a framework, the argument goes on, helps to reduce costs and risks, while maximizing efficiency and opportunities for sharing (Gardiner, 2005).

The analysis of Oxfam's private sector intervention portfolio revealed three competencies that serve as the foundation of all interventions. In this sense, Oxfam's multi-faceted approach, systemic perspective, and collaborative outlook is what provides the Private Sector Program with a specific identity and what might serve as the basis to define a private sector engagement framework. Ideally, a framework for private sector engagement should help to define boundaries and provide guidance, while still allowing Oxfam to take advantage of opportunities and define interventions on an ad hoc basis.

A better definition of such flexible, ambivalent approach would provide continuity to what has been accomplished so far, while also serving as a strategic program management devise. In this vein, creating a model of private sector engagement based on the core competencies of the Private Sector Program, in addition to the human rights that are particularly relevant for Oxfam's mission, would help to ensure the strategic fit of the intervention portfolio with the objectives of the organization.

Even though in some parts of this book I have advocated for a more formal and strategic approach to program management, I also believe that allowing room for experimental and opportunistic behavior will most likely continue to be one of the strengths of Oxfam Novib's Private Sector Program. The analysis of Oxfam's portfolio of interventions yields important insights in terms of delineating Oxfam's engagement with the private sector from a practical point of view. But, it also offers new theoretical considerations about NGOs, particularly in terms of: (i) deriving their core competencies from their theory of change and a collection of interventions, as well as (ii) establishing a link between the identity of an organization and its core competencies.

The concept of core competency, traditionally applied in business circles, can serve to organize NGO activities and to ensure consistency across a portfolio of heterogeneous interventions. Moreover, the idea of core competencies can also assist NGOs in formulating more accessible theories of change, in which causal relations and assumptions become revealed. To this end, the identification of the core competencies and the critical issues of the Private Sector Program, should allow Oxfam to (re)define its private sector theory of change in terms of the aspects it needs to potentiate and those it needs to be cautious about. Accounting for these elements will allow the organization to configure a more consistent and transparent portfolio.

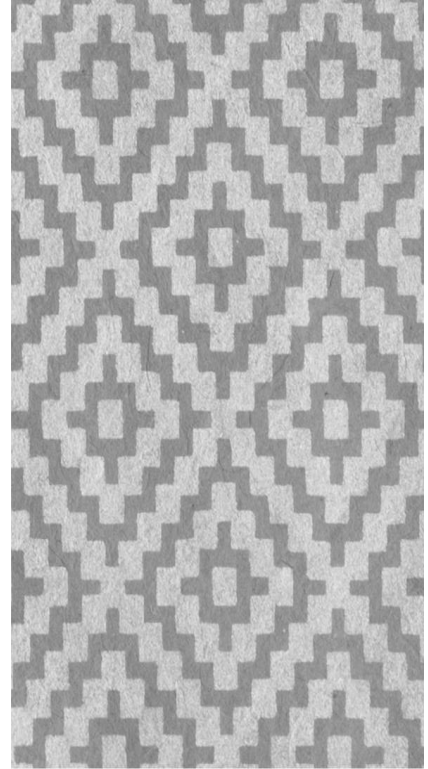
Moreover, this study shows that portfolio analysis is useful for establishing and understanding the relation between the identity of an organization and its core competencies. In the case of Oxfam, the portfolio analysis reveals *how* and *why* Oxfam's engagement with the private sector is an integral part of its identity or differentiating quality. In this regard, the core competencies of the Private Sector Program serve as a means of profiling the character of the organization, of developing a sense of self that provides continuity across space and time.

The analysis of the evolution of the portfolio over time also shows how organizational identity is not a static thing, but a concept that is constructed and reconstructed by organizational members and their interaction with others in given context. This also makes clear that, in fact, organizational identity is a process of becoming that emerges from analyzing a collection of projects or interventions. The result is what authors have called “identity work” (Chia, 1996; Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

In the case of NGOs, this sense of identity is determined by the shared values, beliefs and understandings of actors, as well as by contextual factors. And it becomes manifested through its repertoires of action, i.e. strategies, interventions, and tactics. In this study, the reconstruction of Oxfam’s private sector theory of change and the analysis of its intervention portfolio reveals these elements, showing that NGOs have multiple identity elements that come to life through their interaction with multiple actors in multiple actions.

Uncovering all of these elements was largely made possible by the action research design of this project. My close and continued interaction with practitioners at Oxfam was instrumental in collecting data of past private sector interventions and in making sense of the beliefs and assumptions that guide their practice.

Accordingly, this project demanded a greater degree of involvement from practitioners than the study of Oxfam’s participation in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm oil and the articulation of rights-based principles therein. As a matter of fact, I completed some parts of the analysis jointly with the Private Sector Coordinator through a sustained dialogue, particularly about the intervention portfolio and its critical issues. Perhaps for this reason, it was during the elaboration of this particular project when I found it hardest to remain detached and retain the position of a friendly outsider.



PART V

Managing a multiple-table situation: Oxfam's interaction with proponents and opponents of shrimp aquaculture certification

36 ■ Recognizing a multiple-table problem

Early in spring 2012, a group of NGOs strongly opposed Oxfam's involvement in the development of a certification scheme for tropical shrimp farms. According to these NGOs, private certification, as a strategy to tackle social and environmental problems, would only encourage green washing and a race to the bottom in the farmed shrimp sector. This opponent coalition of NGOs called themselves the "Conscientious Objectors" or "Critical Outsiders" (COs); that is, outsiders to the certification process. These opponents included more than 70 grassroots environmental and social NGOs, active both in the North and South (see Annex C at the end of this part of the book for details).

The objections of this group to Oxfam's interventions in the shrimp sector dated from a few years back, and soon a number of representatives of the critical NGO alliance would take part in a conference call with Oxfam. In this call, both NGO groups – Oxfam and the critical NGOs – would discuss their views about farmed shrimp certification and look for potential complementarities and synergies.

I was invited to take part in the conference call with the idea of exploring whether this case would make interesting research from the perspective of NGO interaction in the context of private certification. Sitting in the conference room and listening to the conversation, I first witnessed the controversies that can emerge between two NGO groups when they have a different vision about how to approach a sustainability challenge, even if they agree on the problem. In this particular case, Oxfam and the critical NGOs shared a similar definition of the problem, but their ideas about how to bring change differed. The theory of change of each group had specific assumptions about the mechanisms and tools that could make the farmed shrimp sector more sustainable.

Environmental NGO WWF convened the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues (SHAD) in 2007 with the objective of developing a credible certification standard for more sustainable shrimp production. The process conducted by SHAD, which brought together stakeholders from the private sector, academia, and NGOs, was managed by a Global Steering Committee (GSC) formed by 14 people. This group was also in charge of reviewing the standards based on their expertise, the expertise of others, and the input received by the general public. The standard created by SHAD would later become part of the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), an umbrella organization that certifies a total of eight different farmed species since 2010. The ASC is financially supported by a number of NGOs, like WWF; companies such as Heiploeg, Nutreco and Anova; and donors like the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) (WWF, 2013).

During the telephone conversation, the positions of both NGO groups became apparent. In the view of the critical NGO alliance, the farmed shrimp sector could in no way be sustainable because of its negative impacts on the environment and local communities. Certification, they argued, could only help to legitimize practices that were not necessarily responsible or even improved in accordance to their standards.

On the other hand, Oxfam's vision was that given the continuous expansion of the sector, certification could help to improve management practices and make shrimp production more accountable for its impacts, even if it could not radically transform the whole sector in the short term. For Oxfam, short-term transformation is an incremental process with the potential to eventually deliver sector-wide transformation. Oxfam had engaged with several members of

the critical alliance for years, and now these relationships were at stake. The discussion held with members of the critical alliance sparked a conversation within Oxfam's Private Sector Team about how to manage relationships with other NGO groups and how to best define and justify Oxfam's strategic interventions in the tropical shrimp sector.

Oxfam's close collaboration with the private sector, in the farmed shrimp sector as well as other sectors, rendered it vulnerable to criticism from other NGOs and grassroots movements. More often than not, discussions within the Private Sector Team dealt with the difficulties that came with having to delineate the different roles played by Oxfam – as donor, partner, and advocator – while ensuring accountability towards all constituent groups.

As the previous part of this book showed, Oxfam is primarily a recipient and a donor. It receives funding from international development agencies and governments in order to support local partner NGOs in developing countries. In the case of shrimp aquaculture, Oxfam has for many years financed the advocacy activities of a number of local NGOs. For instance, together with SEAFish for Justice, a network of national and regional fisher folk organizations and NGOs from Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, Oxfam published a generic cost-benefit analysis of the industry. It has also taken part in consumer campaigns in the USA and UK that exposed the negative impacts of aquaculture expansion.

Oxfam is also a partner, frequently forging alliances with other international NGOs to build on their individual capabilities and have a larger impact. In the context of shrimp certification, Oxfam often shared tasks and initiatives with ally NGOs, like IUCN and WWF, in order to maximize their resources. Oxfam's main contribution to such alliances is its expertise on social issues and its relationship with NGOs in shrimp-producing countries. Moreover, Oxfam acts in representation of the interests of local communities and smallholders, empowering them so that they can better claim their rights in international regulatory arenas, such as those promoted by the United Nations and the industry.

Regarding the certification initiative in question, the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, Oxfam's intervention pursued a two-fold objective: on the one hand, it included liaising with opponent NGO groups and the industry to develop a certification standard, and on the other, it involved working with local producer communities to ensure that they benefited from the certification scheme. Additionally, Oxfam helped to ensure that the standard was feasible and affordable in terms of its implementation and verification.

In terms of working with local NGOs, Oxfam and its partners in developing countries have not always shared the same vision about how to bring about change. In principle, this does not necessarily constitute a problem, as Oxfam is committed to supporting different ways of working, as long as they contribute to its overall goal of ending poverty and protecting human rights. Yet, disagreements due to cultural differences and power imbalances have not been rare. More complicated were the disagreements with NGOs that were openly critic about Oxfam's theory of change and strategic interventions. The case analyzed here exemplifies this.

I sat in the conference room taking notes while Oxfam's Private Sector Coordinator and one of the Directors talked to the critical NGOs. As I listened to the arguments put forward by one group and the other, I wondered if Oxfam and the critical NGOs would be able to get past their differences and work together or whether they would become adversaries (i.e. publicly in contention about the merits of certification). Working with proponents and opponents of certification was not without challenges. NGO alliances are difficult to establish, but even more difficult to manage and sustain through time. So in this case, I expected that negotiating with a critical group would be much more complicated.

After the conference call, I spoke with the Coordinator of the Private Sector Program and we agreed that this case should become documented and studied. We believed the case could present a unique learning opportunity for Oxfam and other NGOs, mainly for the following reasons:

- Reconstructing and analyzing Oxfam's private sector theory of change and its application in the farmed shrimp sector serves to identify major points of contention between Oxfam and its critics, as well as inconsistencies or erroneous assumptions, in particular regarding the potential and pitfalls of certification as a change mechanism.
- Recording the steps taken by Oxfam to forge an insider/outsider intervention strategy that demanded coordination with members of the critical NGO alliance to identify the reasons why the deployment of a joint strategy either succeeded or failed.

During one of our many subsequent conversations in which I talked about all the different actors that Oxfam needed to engage in the certification of farmed shrimp, the image of Oxfam having to play simultaneously on many different chessboards emerged. This image led me to develop an analytical interpretation of Oxfam's situation.

The idea of different chessboards reminded me of something I had heard during a lecture given by Prof. Barbara Gray at Utrecht University. Gray (2007) spoke about the *two-table problem* faced by organizations as they engaged in collaboration with other actors, thus being pushed to agree to decisions both at the stakeholder table and at their own constituency table. As organizations identify common goals and formulate new perspectives at the multi-stakeholder table, they must constantly communicate their new understanding to the organizations they represent, as well as to the general public.

In the case in which an NGO participates in the development of a certification standard, together with multiple other actors, the situation could be conceptualized as one of *multiple tables*, for an NGO needs to negotiate and come to agreements with the donors, affiliates, recipients, as well as private sector actors and other NGOs active in the field. Drawing on this multiple-table idea, allowed me to better understand how conflicting and diverging positioning between NGO groups emerges and is managed in the context of private governance arrangements. Accordingly, the questions that guided my research efforts included:

What are the risks in dealing with a multiple-table situation in the context of diverging NGO strategies to achieve sustainability? And, how can this be managed?

I decided to use empirical evidence obtained from Oxfam's participation in the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues in order to characterize the processes of interaction between diverse NGO groups from a framing perspective. As this case shows, the dynamic interplay between NGOs requires that goals become constantly (re)aligned and positions (re)negotiated. All of this takes place in a field in which interactions with other stakeholders need to be managed, together with the variety of roles and functions that are demanded from a particular NGO.

37 ■ Conceptualizing multiple-table situations from the perspective of frames

During my interaction with members of Oxfam's Private Sector Team I became aware of the ways in which NGOs are forced to negotiate visions, actions, and strategies as they engage in collaborative efforts with other public and private actors. Particularly in the context of private governance, initiatives often emerge in organizational fields in which parties frame issues in different, and often conflicting, ways. This observation became a constant in my research journal and led me to explore the notion of frames as a heuristic tool to analyze the processes of NGO interaction.

Frames help us to render events meaningful and to organize experience and guide action. They perform an interpretative function and are the outcome of negotiating meaning. The literature on framing suggests that frames are generated and elaborated largely, although not exclusively, through discursive processes (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004). Accordingly, actors employ strong and generic narratives to negotiate an understanding of a problematic condition, make attributions about who and what is to blame, articulate a set of responses, and urge others to act in concert to affect change (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gray & Schruijer, 2010; Zwartkruis et al., 2012).

This process of construction of meaning has been conceptualized as the active, dynamic, and evolving phenomenon of interactional framing (Dewulf et al., 2009). According to Dewulf et al. (2011), interactional issue framing works by arranging and rearranging the elements of an issue in such way that its meaning is altered. From this perspective, actors are conceived as focusing on certain issue-elements as part of their frame, while leaving out others. Here, frames are understood as perspective-based co-constructions of meaning that occur through language in interaction (Curşeu & Schruijer, 2008).

In the particular case of NGOs, De Bakker (2012) has studied the field of corporate social responsibility, arguing that different activist groups employ their own frames within a particular organizational field. Accordingly, they make use of a set of tactics to try and change the perceptions of other groups. Each of these groups will try to change the institutional conditions in the same organizational field, but their strategies might vary in accordance to their views (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007).

In order to analyze the dynamic interplay between the NGOs that act as proponents of certification – including Oxfam – and those that oppose it, I designed a research strategy based on the analysis of organization-level data, accessed and analyzed during my stay at Oxfam Novib. For this purpose, I used two methods in complementary fashion: event sequencing and longitudinal qualitative data analysis, together with conversational analysis.

Longitudinal qualitative data research is an emerging method for investigating social life (see Saldaña, 2003; Thomson & Holland, 2003). It suggests that it is through time that we can begin to grasp the nature of social change, the mechanisms and strategies used by groups and individuals, and the ways in which structural change impacts the social world. In longitudinal qualitative research, time is not simply linked to a trend in data, but it is mediated through a cultural turn that explores the textures of social life.

Textures here are understood as the subjective meanings and active crafting of social relationships, cultural practices, identities, and pathways. In this sense, it is the interplay between the temporal and the cultural dimensions of life that allows longitudinal qualitative analysis to focus on the plot and detailed story lines of key actors rather than on general trends.

Capturing the more fluid and individualized notions of turning points or defining moments requires creative approaches to data collection. In this case, I obtained research data from the email exchanges sustained between Oxfam, other proponents of farmed shrimp certification, and its opponents during the period 2008–2013. I performed a quick scan of 2813 emails and selected 150 for a full-fledged analysis, given their contents and relevance to the topic under scrutiny. From these texts, the main events and narratives in the “conversation” were identified and sequenced. This data was further coded to characterize the positions of the different NGO groups regarding the creation of a certification scheme for farmed tropical shrimp.

The second method I employed for analyzing the data was conversational analysis. Conversational analysis is a field that focuses primarily on issues of meaning and context in interaction (see Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). It is rooted in ethnomethodology, as discussed by Garfinkel (Heritage, 2013), and has been widely used in linguistic and sociological studies to understand how people make sense of complex issues in and through conversations (Ford & Ford, 1995; Sacks, 1992). According to this approach, it is not uncommon that differences in issue framing emerge, particularly in conversations about change. Here, people use frames that serve their current interactional goals in a conversation.

Conversational analysis allowed me to work with observational data and transcripts simultaneously in order to construct analytical categories in an inductive and empirically based way. From the data obtained from the email exchanges, teleconferences, and official documents and minutes from the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues, I reconstructed the conversations sustained between Oxfam and the different actors in the organizational field. Later, I transcribed and analyzed sequences of conversations to identify differences in issue framing, including disagreements, questions, or challenging statements. I then scrutinized the different sequences iteratively, deriving the different attributes of framing enacted by the different NGOs.

Once I had finished collecting and analyzing the data, I presented the preliminary results to my supervisors. We sat in a café in Utrecht’s central train station and drank coffee *verkeerd* as we discussed my research. Looking at the notes I had made in preparation for our meeting, I explained the different frames that I had identified. In broad strokes, the movements for and against the certification of shrimps produced in farms in tropical countries pursued some form of political and economic change. Accordingly, Oxfam and the critical NGOs talked about their ideal world, about what mechanisms could trigger a certain type of change, and about the strategies that they considered to be most effective. What was particularly notable, was that the

As I explained this, my supervisors and I came to the realization that the discussion between Oxfam and the critical NGOs was not so much about material or motivational aspects, but more about normative and strategic considerations. These matters had been previously discussed in terms of core framing tasks by Snow and Benford (1988), as well as of the typology of framing by Zwartkruis et al. (2012). According to (Benford & Snow, 2000), framing processes are a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements.

From their perspective, movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders. Actors do this by enacting three main framing processes relevant to the generation, elaboration, and diffusion of collective action, namely, diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational

framing. Together, these core framing tasks enable movement actors to form consensus and mobilize society.

For Zwartkruis et al. (2012), frames reside in and operate on different levels of social dynamics. They argue that framing takes place at the localized collective level, in addition to face-to-face interaction and global discourses. In their study of framing of agri-food innovations, they drew on interactional framing theory – which investigates the co-construction of issues, identities, and processes as they are negotiated in interaction – and cognitive framing – based on the way actors conceptualize the substantive topics in a dispute – to analyze technological innovation processes. Additionally, they added a third dimension, material framing, to analyze the way artifacts enable or constrain understanding, action, and interaction.

While these studies were very helpful in terms of conceptualizing my research and linking it to existing literature, the framing distinctions promoted by each group were not adequate enough to make sense of the data I had collected. Based on the data analysis, I defined three categories of attributes of framing as enacted by NGOs in a context of multi-stakeholder governance: ontological, normative, and strategic framing attributes.

1. *Ontological framing*: This type of framing refers to the nature, definition, and scope of the sustainability problem. Here, frames are used to shape, understand, and communicate the actual situation. Ontological framing can be perceptual, relating to ideas, beliefs, biases, and social embedding that limit and shape how actors perceive the sustainability problem. Or it can be functional, resulting from the presence of a particular stimulus that triggers an inevitable response which shapes or limits actions.
2. *Normative framing*: This level discusses why the identified sustainability problem is in fact a problem. Usually, it involves statements that affirm how things ought to be and how to value them. It also establishes what is good or bad and which actions are right or wrong. The objective of normative frames is to determine and prescribe values, expressing preference for a particular type of order as dictated by commitment to a particular ideal.
3. *Strategic framing*: At this level solutions to the problem and ways to accomplish them are formulated. In this sense, strategies form a road map of how to get from the actual to the desired situation. Strategic framing gives direction to organizational values, culture, goals, and missions. It allows us to define functional strategies that can be pursued in projects.

Framing is relevant, both in practice and in concept. Practically, it is an active process phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. And conceptually, it helps to systematically understand how issues are discussed, for frames cannot be observed directly. This categorization of framing attributes is merely analytical. In reality, ontological, normative, and strategic elements are constantly interwoven in conversations, not necessarily in logical or consistent ways.

Often, NGOs state their normative and strategic views in a so-called theory of change. Theories of change, which are grounded on ontological considerations, are used to describe the types of interventions that are needed to trigger specific changes, thus forming the basis for strategic planning, decision-making, and evaluation. For this reason, theories of change constitute a good place to start looking how issues are conceptualized and addressed by a particular NGO.

An analytical model build around framing attributes provided me with an entry point to study the different positions and strategic interventions of Oxfam and other NGO groups in relation to the creation of a certification scheme for tropical farmed shrimp. Specifically, the concept of frames helps to shed light on how NGOs deal with a multiple-table situation, playing different roles in different arenas, while simultaneously engaging with a variety of actors. It also allows for uncovering different positions and strategic interventions, as well as for discussing how NGOs manage conflicting relationships and visions.

38. ■ Sketching the shrimp aquaculture organizational field

Shrimp is one of the most popular types of seafood in the world. Shrimp farms are being created around the world to help meet the global demand, which roughly accounts to five million metric tons per year. Shrimp aquaculture increased nine-fold during the 1990s and currently one-third of the shrimp sold globally are produced on farms. Farmed shrimp production remains one of the most controversial sectors due to its impacts on coastal ecologies and people. Most tropical shrimp farms are located in China, Thailand, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Brazil, Ecuador, and Bangladesh, while the majority of farmed shrimp is exported to the United States, Japan, and the European Union (Hatanaka, 2010; Vandergeest & Unno, 2012).

Around 2004, several NGOs in South East Asia began to warn about the extensive damage caused by the rapidly growing shrimp industry to coastal environments and coastal rural livelihoods. At that point, the debate was mostly dominated by concerns over the environmental impacts of tropical shrimp farming, for instance, the destruction of mangrove forests, surface water use, pollution by pesticides and antibiotics, pollution by organic inputs related to shrimp feed remains and fertilizers, excessive use of shrimp feed made of fishmeal (made of wild-caught fish) and soy bean oil, unwanted by-catch obtained together with small shrimp post larvae from the wild, and disease outbreaks infecting also wild shrimp populations (CREM B.V., 2003; Van Mulekom et al., 2006).

It was only a few years later when actors began a more comprehensive approach to dealing with the sustainability of the farmed shrimp sector. Eventually, the damages that shrimp aquaculture imposes on the resources upon which people's livelihood depend, also became acknowledged. For example, it may help decrease agricultural production in fields around shrimp farms, trigger land conflicts, displace people from habitual lands, pose high economic risks and debt traps for small farmers, reduce access to and availability of natural resources for local communities, offer poor working conditions for employees, and threaten consumer safety (CREM B.V., 2003).

In order to address such challenges, environmental NGO WWF began working together with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Bank, the Network of Aquaculture Centers of Asia Pacific and the U.N. Environmental Program to form the Shrimp Aquaculture and the Environment Consortium. After seven years, and with the publication of many case studies, the FAO's Committee on Fisheries adopted the International Principles for Responsible Shrimp Farming created by the consortium (see FAO et al., 2006).

Oxfam's participation in efforts to make the farmed shrimp sector more sustainable can also be traced back to these developments. Oxfam participated in a UN FAO expert meeting and, together with IUCN Netherlands and WWF USA, helped draft the FAO's principles. Similarly, Oxfam persuaded GlobalGAP (the EU retailer and food processor association) to pay attention to environmental and social concerns in its aquaculture food safety protocol.

From the perspective of Oxfam, intervening in such initiatives was mainly aimed at ensuring the inclusion of social concerns in both standards. The inclusion of a social agenda in the FAO and GlobalGAP standards, helped trigger positive responses from governments in South-East Asian countries, as well as Brazil, China, and India. In this regard, Oxfam Novib internal reports mentioned that these responses included opening the doors for independent third party audits

(e.g. Thailand and China), legal adjustments to include community consultations (e.g. Vietnam and Indonesia), and attempts to harmonize standards for aquaculture production, including the mitigation of environmental and social issues (e.g. the ASEAN-GAP protocol).

Regardless of such positive efforts, both Oxfam and IUCN decided against publicly endorsing the GlobalGAP standard. In their opinion, GlobalGAP's committees had not been truly multi-stakeholder and were thus unable to deliver an inclusive, credible, and transparent standard. This situation illustrates how NGOs that participate in the development of a standard eventually reach a turning point, or crossroad, when they need to shift from engaging in a technical process with experts towards introducing a consumer label to the market place and promoting it in a much broader context.

Around the same time, WWF invited Oxfam to join the Aquaculture Dialogues, a collaborative process that aimed to develop sustainability standards for eight different aquaculture species, including tropical shrimp. Specifically, the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogue (SHAD) was convened in the form of regional meetings in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. SHAD aimed to define performance-based standards on environmental, social, and economic criteria.

The SHAD process was led by a Global Steering Committee (GSC), formed by 14 persons responsible of managing the standard drafting process based on public input, their own expertise, and the expertise of others. The GSC was formed in 2009 and sought to have balanced representation from members of NGOs, academia, and industry who were willing to volunteer their time and commitment. Some of its members included the Monterrey Bay Aquarium, Bureau Veritas, Aqua Star, Groupe UNIMA, First Choice, Belize Aquaculture LTD, FishWise, Sustainable Fisheries Partnership, Coastal Development Partnership, IUCN, and WWF USA.

In 2010, the SHAD was placed under the umbrella of the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), an independent, nonprofit organization in charge of managing and implementing the nine different standards created during the various Aquaculture Dialogues, including the standard for farmed shrimp. The ASC administers the shrimp standard and promotes best environmental and social practices with the goal of transforming the international seafood market.

Together, the emergence of these varying initiatives helped to institutionalize the organizational field of certified tropical farmed shrimp. The efforts deployed to certify shrimps produced in farms involved a wide range of actors, demanding that each organization continuously managed its relationship with a large number of stakeholders in the organizational field. Accordingly, the organizational field studied here includes organizations like Oxfam and the NGOs who promote shrimp certification, as well as the NGOs that oppose it, in addition to the private sector, international donors, the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues and its Global Steering Committee, the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, local communities and marginalized groups (see picture). Nevertheless, my research centers on the analysis of NGO interaction, thus exclusively focuses on the interaction between Oxfam and the NGOs that propose and oppose certification for farmed shrimp.

When Oxfam became involved in the shrimp certification debate, it sought to raise awareness about the social and economic implications of the sector on rural poor people. Based on local NGO campaigns in shrimp producing countries, calling on local governments to improve regulation, Oxfam managed to engage importers of shrimps in the Netherlands and the European Union and trigger positive actions from their side. Together with other international NGO allies, such as Friends of the Earth and Both Ends, Oxfam produced brochures and flyers explaining the issues behind the production of farmed shrimp to the Dutch industry.

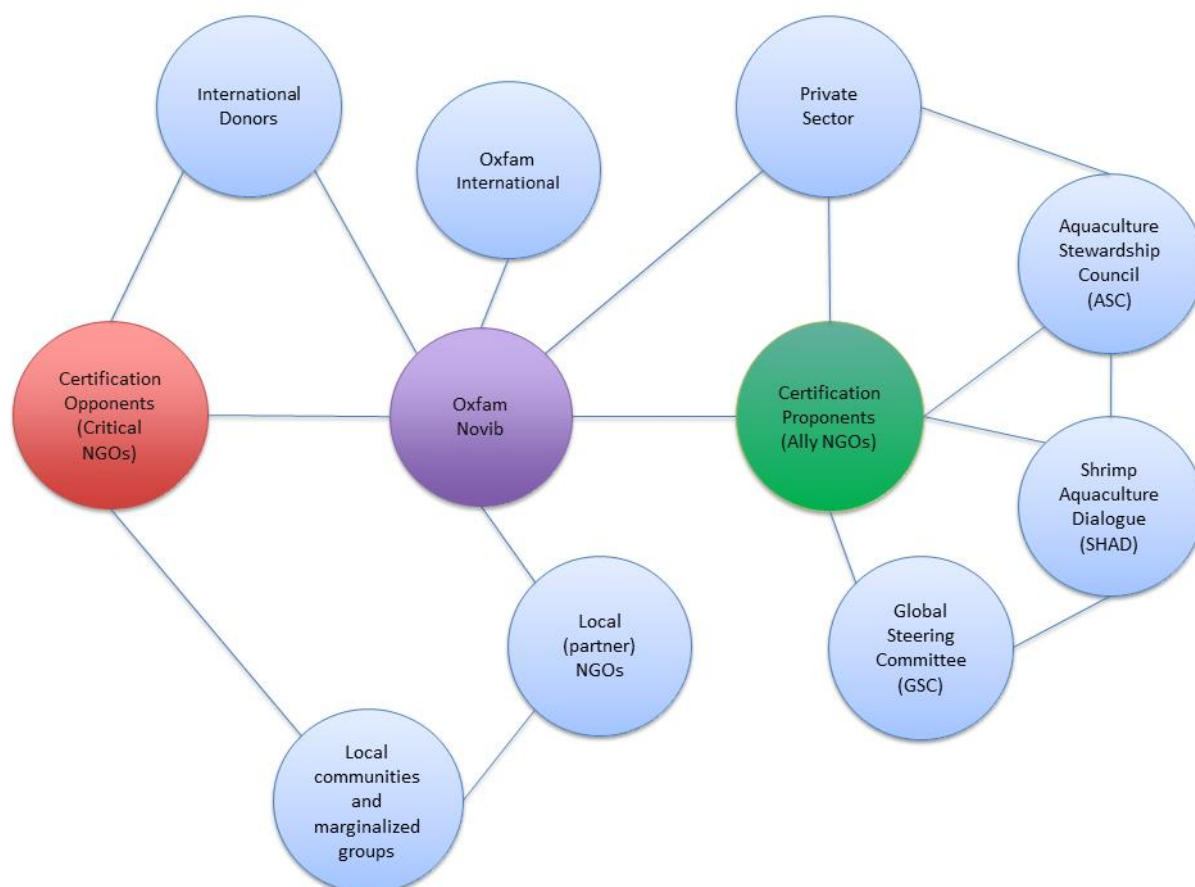


FIGURE 10: NGO INTERACTION IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL FIELD OF SHRIMP AQUACULTURE CERTIFICATION

Since then, Oxfam has continued to develop and seek funding for a shrimp aquaculture program that is primarily concerned with bringing social and economic benefits to the people either working in the tropical shrimp sector or affected by its expansion. In broad strokes, Oxfam's Shrimp Aquaculture Improvement Program pursues the following general objectives (Oxfam Novib, 2010).

- i. Protecting livelihood opportunities of poor communities (including those living around the farms) impacted by aquaculture practices.
- ii. Ensuring equal participation of the poor and marginalized segments of society in decision-making related to aquaculture development.
- iii. Aiming for optimum sustained benefits from aquaculture on smallholder income (on the farms).

These objectives are to be achieved through the combination of four strategic lines of action, aimed at the main four stakeholder groups in the aquaculture sector.

- i. Influencing the private sector through setting standards and certification by means of engaging the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council.
- ii. Influencing governments by means of supporting partners (like SEAFish for Justice,

Mangrove Action Project, Forest Peoples Program, and Environmental Justice Foundation) in their campaigns and work to promote improved local regulation toward “good aquaculture practices.”

- iii. Influencing the public and consumer-base by raising public awareness (through consumer guides, for instance) and supporting NGOs that criticize the impacts of the aquaculture industry.
- iv. Assisting small-scale farmers to comply with standards (ASC and GlobalGAP) and help develop equitable and responsible relationships through the value chain.

Shrimp aquaculture certification initiatives have long been a controversial area. This has motivated Oxfam to engage both with critics and supporters. Actors in the field have had to increasingly engage with each other, developing a collective understanding and a shared conceptual model of a more sustainable shrimp production system. In the last couple of years, however, achieving consensus between different NGOs groups has been particularly challenging. During 2012, the debate became increasingly polarized, with Oxfam pushing to reconcile the position of proponents and opponents of shrimp certification.

39. ■ Looking at NGO interplay: A story in three episodes

I am sitting at my desk in Mexico City, looking at the file that I titled *Data Analysis and Reconstruction of Events*. I am trying to find the best way to make sense of all the information that I compiled there. The pages were filled with conversation and event sequences, complemented by quotes, which I extracted from the email exchanges between Oxfam, the critical NGOs, Oxfam's allies, and the SHAD. I realize that it is important to give a detailed account of how an effort of collaboration between different NGOs groups, which seemed so promising at the beginning, resulted in complete deadlock.

During my last months at Oxfam in 2012, I witnessed the conflict between Oxfam and the critical NGOs reach its final stage. In my research journal, I find notes from the two conference call meetings that I attended, as well as other notes I made during the subsequent internal discussions held in the Private Sector Team. The events that led to the critical NGOs placing a complaint about Oxfam's shrimp aquaculture work began long before my days at Oxfam Novib.

Considering the qualities of time and text necessary for longitudinal qualitative analysis, I reconstruct and discuss the events and conversations that took place between 2008 and 2013 between Oxfam and the other organizations active in shrimp aquaculture certification efforts. The narrative is divided into three main episodes: first, how Oxfam came to the decision of engaging with SHAD, taking a mediator role between SHAD's Global Steering Committee and the NGOs that were critical of the initiative. Second, the period in which Oxfam developed a SHAD intervention strategy based on insider/outsider coordination with the critical NGOs. And last, how and why the coordination efforts with critical NGOs failed, resulting in institutional complaints and stalemate.

First episode: Oxfam engages with the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues and takes an intermediary role between SHAD and the critical NGOs

In response to the emergence of various private certification efforts, an alliance of critical NGOs – the so-called the Conscientious Objectors – released a public declaration against the process of shrimp certification during the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands held in 2008 in South Korea. Here, they argued that the process of certification

“...openly excludes the millions of victims of industrial shrimp aquaculture.”

They urged WWF to revise and change its position concerning the certification of farmed shrimp and called on other institutions to declare themselves against any similar process of certification in the industry.

The critical NGOs opposed farmed shrimp certification stating that industry- and funder-driven initiatives, such as GlobalGap and SHAD,

“...do not allow for the voice of the majority of affected stakeholders – the indigenous and local communities – to have meaningful input to this so-called ‘dialogue’ and standard-setting process.”

Further, they argued that certification was only an effort to improve public image and

“...mask ecological damage, human rights violations, widening income gaps, loss of jobs, and other real problems caused by the industry.”

Most importantly, they believed certification efforts ignored the rights to food security and sovereignty of the communities where shrimp is produced.

Later, during a SHAD meeting in Bangkok, Oxfam attempted to open a space in the discussion for the diverging opinions of the NGOs that favored certification and those that opposed it. In this sense, Oxfam began playing a facilitating and convening function. By early 2009, Oxfam and the critical NGOs had agreed that,

“...particularly southern voices need to be heard in aquaculture-related dialogues.”

To this end, Oxfam and the critical NGOs began finding common ground on ways to consolidate the inclusion of such voices in the SHAD process. Simultaneously, the critical NGO alliance explained to Oxfam and IUCN about their efforts to rebuild their global network via a more proactive advocacy approach. In such efforts, they attempted to secure their presence in the RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands and FAO meetings in order to ensure that grassroots viewpoints were heard and recognized.

For this, they asked for support via both Oxfam and IUCN to cover travel and participation fees to international forums. Oxfam showed interest in providing funding for such activities, as well as in co-funding a study that compared different certification schemes available in the market, including GlobalGAP, Global Aquaculture Alliance, Thai Shrimp Code, and SHAD. However, these initiatives never materialized.

When in early 2009 WWF announced its plans to create the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) to manage and implement the standards created through the different Aquaculture Dialogues, the critical NGOs responded negatively. The group highlighted that the creation of such an organization helped to further ignore the voices of the large number of NGOs, local communities, academics, and citizens who demanded a moratorium on the expansion of the farmed shrimp industry. The Steering Group of SHAD discussed how they could respond to the opposition voiced by the critical NGOs, ultimately deciding not to respond directly. The critical NGOs, they believed, had already been given a space to share their views during the consultation phase of the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues.

As part of its larger shrimp advocacy work, Oxfam began strategizing with like-minded NGOs about its engagement with the ASC and its contribution to the elaboration of the shrimp standard. Oxfam's focus revolved mainly around land rights and impacts on local communities, as well as on providing solutions to social conflicts over land use. Together with IUCN and the Sustainable Trade Initiative, also known as IDH (*Initiatief Duurzame Handel*) for its acronym in Dutch, Oxfam began to delineate its engagement with SHAD around such topics.

When the IDH invited Oxfam to participate in its shrimp program and suggested that it join the Steering Committee of ASC, Oxfam was hesitant about how such a move could impact its reputation among its NGO partners in developing countries and the critical NGO alliance. Oxfam estimated that the biggest risk for the organization in supporting the Dutch Trading Initiative's program was

“...the lack of support in our partner network and the great controversy surrounding the certification of shrimp.”

Due to the continued criticism voiced by opposing NGOs, in March 2009, WWF agreed to hire a consultant to develop the community-related social standards for SHAD. This decision triggered some urgency within Oxfam to engage more formally with SHAD and use the opportunity to influence the process. In a memo to WWF and the SHAD Steering Committee, Oxfam stated that it welcomed a more credible certification system, which would be able to reach a large part of the industry.

"We also welcome the idea of designing standards in a participatory way. We hope that standards and certification can be a tool to improve social problems around aquaculture. Many of our partners are very skeptical about this. Some have signed critical statements towards the Aquaculture Dialogues and the ASC. Oxfam Novib takes this criticism very seriously, especially the criticism that the real (affected) stakeholders have not been involved so far. Accordingly, in the shrimp dialogues, Oxfam Novib would like to take a more active role, especially in the social outreach and the development of social standards..."

Resulting from such events, Oxfam made plans to enlarge its Aquaculture program in South-East Asia and obtain more funding – from the IDH and other donors – in order to map the critical NGOs, fund stakeholder meetings, realize a comparative study of farmed shrimp certification schemes, and organize a face-to-face meeting with representatives of the critical NGOs. Also, Oxfam began more intense consultation with partner NGOs about engaging in the creation of the SHAD social standards.

In conversations with NGOs such as Kiara and Forest People's Program, Oxfam explained that it would like to pay more attention to the implementation of the social audits and the verification of the criteria, rather than to the creation of the standards itself. Internally at Oxfam, members of the Private Sector Team and the South-East Asia Team discussed ways

"To develop more intense communication and consultation with civil society (incl. critical NGO group)."

Regarding its participation in the ASC, Oxfam estimated that the critical NGOs could come to understand that Oxfam could exert more influence on the SHAD process from the inside. In order to secure their support, Oxfam decided to contact some of the fiercer NGOs to discuss its positioning. In such emails and telephone calls, some of the critical NGOs supported Oxfam's idea of acting as a critical insider, giving voice to the ideas of the critical actors outside the process, as well as to the idea of creating a type of watch-dog alliance of critical outsiders that could have independent funding for research that could be fed to the critical insiders of the process, such as Oxfam.

Although Oxfam became increasingly pressured to decide on its participation in the ASC, it remained on the sidelines for some months, not committing to any formal or explicit role. This changed around July 2009, when SHAD began developing the social criteria for the standard. Oxfam wrote:

"We need to influence the ASC as advisory board, with decision making capacity, but we need to have our own legitimacy to step out if the ASC doesn't deliver."

Oxfam finished shaping its strategy of critical insider and determined to join SHAD with the objective of creating spaces of influence for the critical voices. Oxfam was determined to support and represent the position and stakes of the critical NGOs within the dialogue, as well as committing adequate resources to it. In early 2010, Oxfam accepted to fund a critical NGO

meeting, so that this group could come to a united position and have a clear political road map regarding its certification work.

Tensions rose again between the NGOs that supported the creation of the ASC standard and those that did not when the critical NGOs were contacted individually by the consultant organization, WorldFish, hired to develop the social criteria for SHAD. Critical NGOs distrusted WorldFish because it is part of CGIAR, an international research organization that was seen as favoring big businesses over independent farmers in the South. According to the critical NGOs, the SHAD's efforts to engage in more meaningful dialogue with local communities and grassroots NGOs were still poor. The critical NGOs refrained from contributing to a process that was, in their opinion,

"...biased, unrepresentative, unsatisfactorily designed, and ultimately flawed."

The SHAD Steering Committee reached out to the critical NGOs, and suggested organizing a face-to-face meeting to further understand the concerns of grassroots NGOs and potentially affected communities. Oxfam agreed to help fund a critical NGO meeting, prior to their meeting with SHAD, so that the alliance could build agreement on goals regarding certification, political pathways, and the contents of a consumer campaign. By the end of 2009, Oxfam had fully adopted a mediator role between SHAD and the critical voices outside the process. As the organization described,

"...by a fragile contact with both IUCN and Forest People's Program we have managed to: have the SHAD invite the critical outsiders to meeting with the Steering Committee and have WWF accept to halt its research on social impacts of large scale shrimp farming in order to allow for more outsider influence on this process. Yet, disagreement and mutual mistrust is still enormous and all can easily fail."

Second episode: Oxfam develops a strategy that relies on insider/outsider coordination with critical NGOs to influence the SHAD process

The emails exchanged with the objective of planning a meeting between the critical NGOs and members of SHAD revealed that Oxfam had become part of the SHAD Global Steering Committee in late 2009. The critical NGOs reacted concerned, as they had the impression that Oxfam was a neutral party, yet it had not informed them of its decision to join. Oxfam appeased their concerns by advocating for the advantages of insider/outsider NGO coordination. As one practitioner explained:

"... having both critical insiders and critical outsiders creates the most influence. Oxfam is not neutral. It never was. Oxfam is simply employing several strategies to achieve equity and poverty objectives... Because we believe that a variety of strategies do more than a single strategy."

Further,

"I think both insiders and outsiders have different roles to play, and both roles need to be played to make a positive change to the objectives we both share."

By then, Oxfam had developed a SHAD intervention strategy based on such insider/outsider NGO coordination. In this regard, Oxfam's theory of change assumed that such a strategy would help to pave the way for Oxfam's approach to influencing the arrangement without getting co-

opted. It would also help manage brand risks, while allowing Oxfam to deploy a good cop/bad cop strategy.

Resulting from the meetings held between the SHAD and the critical NGOs, the groups were finally able to move beyond debating their general position on certification, towards more specific issues. For instance, in February 2010, the critical NGOs posed new questions about the financial transparency of the certification process. The alliance was concerned about the impartiality of the members of SHAD, given their propensity to receive funds from the private sector.

Also, in April 2010, the critical NGO raised concerns about the social and environmental impacts of the 80% of farmed shrimp that would remain uncertified. The main objective of the critical NGOs was halting the destruction of mangroves through illicit shrimp farm developments, and they believed that the best way to achieve this was not through certification, but by reducing consumption of imported shrimp in Europe and USA.

Another specific issue that became part of the discussion was the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in shrimp feed. The SHAD could by no means oppose the use of GMOs if it wanted to secure the participation of the industry and the adoption of its standard. To the contrary, the critical NGOs fiercely opposed the allowance of GMOs in shrimps certified as sustainable. Oxfam's view was that, in the context of shrimp certification, the use of GMOs in shrimp feed should be the farmer's choice as long as it was transparently reported to the public. From the perspective of empowerment, this should allow autonomous decision-making from farmers.

In July 2010, the first version of the SHAD standard was released for the first round of public comments. Oxfam's major contributions to it revolved around principles three and four, regarding community issues and labor, respectively. The publication of the standard was followed by intense discussion within Oxfam about the quality and stringency of the standard's criteria.

In an email titled *Reject SHAD as is*, members of Oxfam's Private Sector Team argued that the standard was far too weak on issues such as the protection of land rights, prior impact assessment, small-farmer market access, community consultation, gender equality, and overall contribution to governance. Moreover, some members questioned whether to accept a watered down version of the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) mechanism and raised questions about the degree of auditability of the standard, given the differing methodologies for big and small shrimp farms.

Regarding the insider/outsider intervention strategy, Oxfam continued to push for improvement in the SHAD from the inside, while supporting the public campaigns of the critical NGOs, outside the SHAD arrangement. Oxfam developed and submitted a proposal for external funding based on such good cop/bad cop interplay. At the end of 2010, and coinciding with the public release of the SHAD standard for a second period of public comments, the SHAD Steering Committee met with the critical NGOs for the second time. Although both parties perceived some progress, the critical NGOs were still dissatisfied with the degree of community involvement in the process.

Additionally, the fact that the SHAD standard allowed the use of GMOs in fish feed, placed Oxfam in a difficult position regarding both its strategic coherence and its relationship with the critical NGOs. The contents of the SHAD standard were in fact incompatible with Oxfam's position in the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS), where it advocated for the prohibition of GMOs in crops certified as sustainable. The difference between such standard and SHAD, however, was that while the RTRS regulated the production of soy itself, SHAD dealt with

shrimp aquaculture, and not the production of feed for shrimp or fish. The standards produced by SHAD did not include the full spectrum of issues related to fish, which made the discussion of the use of GMOs very difficult. Only until 2014 did these issues began to be addressed through another multi-stakeholder initiative called the Feed Dialogues.

In Oxfam's view, the SHAD standard could only go as far as setting criteria to guide and motivate farmers to improve the quality of feed used (e.g. amount of feed, sourcing from MSC-certified fisheries, transparency regarding ingredients, clarification of origins, etc.). But for the critical NGOs, the use of genetically modified soy in shrimp feed was unacceptable. According to them, shrimps that were fed with genetically modified soy could by no means be labeled as sustainable or responsible.

The critical NGOs ultimately rejected the SHAD standard stating that certification would not directly help protect local resource-users and the coastal marine environment; stakeholder involvement had been dominated by the shrimp-export industry, rather than local resource users; the standard and evaluation criteria had been progressively diluted to ensure that at least 20% of the industry could be immediately certified; the SHAD relied on the industry to monitor and regulate itself, using an untested auditing system; the process ignored issues like community displacement and human rights, as well as the threats posed by export-oriented production towards food security; and lastly, certification would not limit actual shrimp consumption, but would only help to legitimize and increase demand in importing countries.

The group also perceived,

"...a growing unease at the way in which traditionally allied NGOs – IUCN and Oxfam – seem to be working behind closed doors in a way that can be seen to be both acting against their global constituents, and in favor of multinational corporations and WWF, who are seeking to legitimize some of the most poisonous, unsustainable, and unfair food-growing practices the world has ever seen."

In March 2011, Oxfam acknowledged during a Private Sector Team meeting that, despite significant success in influencing the content of the shrimp standard, the insider/outsider strategy designed and deployed jointly with the critical NGOs failed to bring the opinions and approaches of both NGO groups to complement each other. While the strategy proved rather effective for making a more powerful contribution to the contents of the standard, Oxfam and the critical NGOs did not achieve consensus regarding the use of GMOs on shrimp feed nor about the merits of the standard from a sustainability and human rights perspective. With time, the critical NGOs dissociated themselves from WWF and, eventually, they also chose to operate in strict independence from Oxfam.

Third episode: Coordination with critical NGO fails, as they place a complaint about Oxfam's shrimp aquaculture strategy, resulting in deadlock

A few months into 2012, the critical NGOs contacted Oxfam Novib's Director to raise concern about Oxfam's strategic intervention in the shrimp sector. In their letter, the critical NGOs suggested to organize a roundtable dialogue with Oxfam to further deepen the debate that had emerged between the two groups and try to come to a common understanding. The group also argued that the shrimp debate needed to be taken beyond one single Oxfam representative (the Program Coordinator) in order to include Oxfam's management team. In an effort to continue the dialogue with the critical alliance, Oxfam responded,

"The debate between Oxfam and the COs (critical outsiders) on the merit or risk of certification is highly valued by Oxfam. Oxfam appreciates the fact that COs are actively raising their voice against the expansion of aquaculture... (However), Oxfam also perceives private sector self-regulatory mechanisms, such as certification, as a stepping stone to stronger government regulation and therefore can be a legitimate, complementary, means to arrive at the solution that we both desire."

In Oxfam's view, both NGO camps shared a great deal of the problem analysis. The difference came when looking for solutions:

"Oxfam considers setting standards as a legitimate and effective (albeit limited) way forward, whereas the CO coalition sees this as illegitimate or not enough."

Resulting from the critical NGOs' complaint, Oxfam reconsidered its positioning towards farmed shrimp certification and its role within ASC in a series of internal discussions and email communications. The recommendation of the Private Sector Team was

"...for Oxfam to remain critically associated to the standard setting mechanisms as a 'technical advisor' in ASC committees during the implementation phase, although NOT to become a member and NOT to publicly endorse the ASC proactively."

The discussion became increasingly polarized within the Lobbying and Advocacy Department at Oxfam Novib. While some people favored ending the dialogue with the critical NGOs, others advocated Oxfam's mission to engage with and create spaces for the dissenting voices. As one Oxfam member stated,

"The limited resources of some of the outsiders force them to use crude, ideological messaging and shaming tactics. That's legitimate NGO work, however."

In August 2012, both groups of NGOs agreed to hold a conference call, and I was invited to sit-in. During the call, both groups expressed their views about certification and discussed the contents of their respective shrimp program. Oxfam made clear that, contrary to the perception of the critical NGOs, it was not actively supporting, nor promoting the ASC. Oxfam had only contributed with technical expertise to the process, taking an advocacy opportunity, negotiating with, and targeting the industry.

"Emerging initiatives like GlobalGap and SHAD were taken as opportunities to introduce more effective governance and enforcement of social and environmental safeguards, at mainstream scale."

While Oxfam seemed content with the outcome of the call, the critical NGOs were less optimistic about it. Some of their representatives felt that they had not been listened to and that many of their questions had remained unaddressed. The issue GMO usage in shrimp feed continued to be a point of contention.

"Feed is a tremendously important Achilles heel of the aquaculture industry... for one kilogram of shrimp raised for the consumer nations, 2-3 kg of wild forage fish might be used. In a misguided attempt to address this serious problem, the aquaculture industry is turning to alternative feeds made from GMO soya, which is having terrible consequences in the Global South."

Oxfam continued to reconsider its internal policy and strategy for the farmed shrimp sector, particularly in terms of the criticism faced for having taken an advisory role in SHAD, its

alliances with other NGOs, and the lack of attention paid to consumers in its theory of change. A member of the Private Sector Team wrote:

"...Perhaps Oxfam has indeed become too close to SHAD and cannot separate itself from the outcomes/impacts of the certification... Indeed Oxfam has been more involved with SHAD, not only as technical advisor, but also as process advisor, lobbyist, member of the Steering Committee, and mediator with the COs in the discussion of the 2nd and 3rd draft versions of the standard."

In response to the situation, Oxfam's Private Sector Team decided it needed to better communicate its work in the shrimp sector by explaining its balanced approach (critical, yet constructive), the opportunity offered to shape a social equity agenda, and its constructive but not committed position.

The critical NGOs pushed further, reaching out to the Director of Oxfam International and hoping to escalate their concerns in the organizational hierarchy so that it would be considered a formal complaint. In response, Oxfam Novib agreed to further engage with the critical NGOs by agreeing to hold a face-to-face meeting between some representatives of the two NGO groups and to share the travelling costs of two representatives from the critical alliance. In the emails exchanged in preparation for the face-to-face meeting, both groups agreed to avoid focusing on the general problems of shrimp farming, in order to concentrate the discussion on their theories of change and the different assumptions that led them to a particular standpoint.

The reason for this, at least from Oxfam's viewpoint, was to limit the discussion to the issue of certification as a change mechanism. Oxfam was not particularly interested in discussing the social and environmental problems of the aquaculture sector, as it shared most of the views of its opponents. Instead, it aimed to pursue critical NGOs to understand and support Oxfam's position on certification. December 2012, four representatives of each group met at the Oxfam Novib office in The Hague to explore areas of complementarity and consider possibilities for future cooperation.

After the meeting, both groups agreed to produce a joint report, which would be submitted to Oxfam International as a way to help resolve the complaint process. Nevertheless, subsequent discussions during the elaboration of such report resulted in each group presenting its own compilation of arguments and suggestions about options to move the relationship forward.

In conclusion of the complaint procedure, and after reviewing the report from each group, in April 2013, Oxfam International's Director called on Oxfam Novib and the critical NGOs to constructively work together by focusing on common interests, while accepting that there would be issues on which their views would differ. After a few more attempts to align their visions, the critical NGOs and Oxfam Novib eventually agreed that their differences were too big to reconcile, opting to continue working with separate agendas.

40. ■ Ontological framing

The interaction between Oxfam, its allies, and the critical NGOs displayed three main frames in terms of the nature and scope of the sustainability problem; namely, the definition of a “sustainable” shrimp aquaculture sector, the merits and potentials of certification, and the quality of the standard produced by SHAD/ASC.

Definition of a “sustainable” shrimp aquaculture sector

Defining what an ideal, “sustainable” shrimp aquaculture sector consisted of, was considerably problematic for the different NGO groups. The view of the critical NGOs is that farmed shrimp production destroys mangrove forests and violates the rights of local fishermen and farmers. The critical NGOs draw on the principles of the RAMSAR Convention, an international treaty signed in 1971 that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources, to support their argumentation. In their view, the only solution to protect mangrove environments is putting a halt to the expansion of the shrimp aquaculture industry by means of limiting consumption and reducing international demand. For this reason, the critical NGOs believe that the *existing* aquaculture shrimp industry can never be labeled or called sustainable.

Oxfam and its allies, share the concern of the critical NGOs for mangrove conservation and the livelihoods of communities. In their view, aquaculture is a food production system that poses considerable impacts to the rural poor and the ecosystems these people rely on. Accordingly, Oxfam and its allies advocate for making the sector more *responsible* by helping to create new and improved regulatory mechanisms that help lessen the impacts of corporate practices and protect local communities. In this sense, the main difference between both NGO groups lies in their change models: while the approach of Oxfam and the ASC aims to mitigate the impacts of mainstream shrimp production, the critical NGOs advocate for stopping industrial shrimp production all together.

Merits and potentials of certification as a sustainability tool

Views about the merits and potentials of certification represent another fundamental difference between Oxfam and the critical NGOs. The latter group argued that certification served only to mask the real sustainability problems, while Oxfam perceived self-regulation as a legitimate instrument to improve corporate practices and a precursor of improved government regulation. For the critical NGOs, certification is only an effort to improve public image that ignores the rights to food security and sovereignty of the communities where farmed shrimp is produced. Because of this, the critical NGOs decided against participating in SHAD so as not to legitimize the arrangement.

On the contrary, Oxfam’s allies, and WWF in particular, are some of the strongest proponents of certification in the world. WWF believes that forging partnerships with proactive private sector actors is a critical element to safeguard the environment. With the demand for seafood rising at a fast pace, WWF has worked to create certification systems that can be independently assessed, creating benchmarks and promoting best practices. In this context, Oxfam chooses to contribute to the creation of private certification standards to help develop criteria and indicators on social impacts, specifically on issues like community impacts, livelihood issues,

contract farming, labor conditions, and human rights. The overriding goal behind such engagements is to ensure food security and a decent livelihood among communities in developing countries.

Quality of the standard produced by SHAD/ASC

When the first draft of the standard produced by SHAD was released for public comments, the critical NGOs qualified the standard as vague and full of untenable generalities. In their view, the standard favored the interests of big businesses over those of independent small farmers, further allowing the expansion of the shrimp aquaculture sector and the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in fish feed.

The critical NGOs estimated that a standard built on weak principles and criteria could by no means aspire to protect mangrove ecosystems and local communities. Oxfam's position in this regard was not that different. Oxfam called for more transparency in the arrangement, as well as for more attention to the definition of principles and the implementation of the certification process. In this regard, Oxfam's view was that SHAD needed to increase the participation of local stakeholders and provide training to auditors on social criteria auditing. Therefore, Oxfam decided to devote most of its efforts to ensuring the correct implementation of social audits and the verification of the criteria, rather than focusing on the creation of the standard itself.

Since Oxfam's allies had been the main proponents and creators of SHAD, their opinion of the quality of the standard was far more positive. For them, the drafting of the standard alone was a major success that needed to be promoted under a positive light. Their main counterargument to Oxfam and the critical NGOs was the fact that SHAD had designed the standard in such way that it could be continuously improved, as it became tested and verified on active shrimp farms. For the allies, the biggest initial challenge had been getting the shrimp producing and exporting industry to participate in SHAD, and they had succeeded. The weaknesses of the standard, they argued, would become resolved in due time. Nevertheless, looking to legitimize the multi-stakeholder process, they showed willingness to address the demands of the critical NGOs and include some of their views in the negotiations.

41. Normative framing

Normative frames refer to the values, preferences, and ideals held by the different stakeholders in the organizational field. The discursive framings deployed by the NGO groups studied here are discussed in terms of: their views about the ideal state of the tropical farmed shrimp sector; the inclusion and/or exclusion of local communities, natural resource users, and dissenting voices in the SHAD process; and the impartiality of the SHAD process and the decision of NGOs to participate in it.

Views about the ideal state of the shrimp aquaculture sector

In terms of ideals, the contrast between the different NGO groups could not be greater. For Oxfam, the ultimate goal is to create a more responsible shrimp aquaculture industry that provides income for millions of people and is respectful of the environment and the rights of local communities and workers. Oxfam and its allies strive for a world in which certification serves as a tool to build the business case for responsibly farmed shrimp by means of creating a market, which in turn helps to lift the social and environmental performance of firms. The critical NGOs, on the other hand, would like to see a world in which farmed shrimp production intended for export is prohibited, and only tolerated for domestic consumption.

The conflicting views between the proponents and opponents of certification about the ideal state of the shrimp sector can be further illustrated by looking at the controversial discussion on the use of GMOs in feed ingredients, such as genetically modified soy. While the critical NGOs were dead set against the allowance of GMOs to feed shrimp that were labeled as responsible or sustainable, Oxfam proposed self-declaration system. In this system, farmers would be able to choose what kind of feed they purchased and used, as long as they communicated it. And SHAD would be responsible for ensuring retailer traceability and package labeling. After some negotiation within SHAD, it became agreed that shrimp feed containing genetically modified ingredients would be allowed only if and when information about this was made easily available to retailers and consumers. This became covered in principle seven of the Standard.

Inclusion/exclusion of local communities, natural resource users, and dissenting voices in SHAD

At a more tangible level, the different NGO groups showed diverging discursive framings about whether and how to include/exclude specific stakeholder groups and positions in/from the SHAD process. The critical NGOs rejected the standard and opposed the creation of the ASC, arguing that this type of governance arrangements was mostly industry-driven, leaving little room for affected stakeholders to have meaningful input in the process, thus turning the dialogue into an “*INGO-business fiesta*,” as somebody put it. Certification, they argued, does not actually protect small-scale producers and local communities from natural degradation and unfair economic practices. In fact, SHAD would only serve to certify better technical practices and produce more shrimp for the export market, without bringing actual improvements to local food security. To no avail, the process of certification would only contribute to openly exclude millions of producers in the sector.

Moreover, the critical NGOs also perceived that SHAD offered little room for discussing and solving some important deficiencies of the certification system itself, such as issues of impartiality, representation, land rights, illegality, conflicts, and links to national legislation.

Because such matters had not been properly institutionalized at the beginning of the SHAD process, efforts made to include critical voices later on proved futile. In this regard, Oxfam's view was not too different from that of the critical NGOs.

For Oxfam, support of critical voices was necessary to improve the governance process. Mainly for this reason, Oxfam developed an intervention strategy that relied on coordination with the critical NGOs that chose to remain outside the SHAD process. Oxfam estimated that with "partners" inside, the critical NGOs would have more influence in the process and outcome of SHAD. When this type of NGO coordination was suggested to the conveners of SHAD, they showed some openness to take into consideration the views of the critical NGOs and improve the consultation process with local communities. In the opinion of SHAD, the interests of small farmers, natural resource users, and local communities had been adequately represented by social NGOs, such as Oxfam and the members of the critical NGO alliance.

Impartiality of the SHAD process and the participation of NGOs therein

Issues of impartiality within the SHAD process were of great concern for the different NGO groups and determined, to some extent, their decision on whether to engage with SHAD in one way or another. In this regard, the critical NGO alliance worried that there had not been real involvement of local resource users in the creation of the standard and that SHAD had not commissioned serious research to collect input and feedback from small farmers and local communities.

Further, they argued that the process for selecting SHAD/ASC board members had not been fair, democratic, or transparent. In this sense, the critical NGOs were particularly opposed to Oxfam playing an intermediary role, arguing that Oxfam – as a reputed development NGO – was lending its name to nothing but business as usual. The critical NGOs repeatedly resisted Oxfam's participation in a process that lacked financial transparency and which clashed with the objectives pursued in other Oxfam interventions, such as the GROW campaign, Poverty Footprints, and its overall opposition to the expansion of resource-dependent industries.

In the view of critical NGOs, Oxfam should have never accepted the aims of the original standard to become progressively diluted so that at least 20% of the industry could be immediately certified. For them, there was no way to turn the page; Oxfam had put its reputation on the line by deciding to endorse an industry that was inherently wasteful and destructive.

Contrary to this, Oxfam believed that engagement in the SHAD process was crucial in order to have influence on the outcome. In its shrimp work, Oxfam employed a variety of strategies and the creation of private standards was one among many. While Oxfam agreed with the critical NGOs on the weakness of the standard, mainly in relation to issues of land rights protection (free, prior, and informed consent; impact assessment; small farmer access; community consultation; and gender equality), it opted to strengthen the SHAD process by means of financing stakeholder meetings and a comparative study of different shrimp certification schemes, as well as holding face-to-face meetings with representatives of the critical NGO alliance to better coordinate their advocacy efforts. Ultimately, Oxfam believed that the participation of different types of NGOs would help ensure the quality of the governance process and the standard produced.

42. Strategic framing

In terms of strategic framing, the different NGO groups defined ways to deal with the sustainability problem at hand, as well as with their differing positions and views. In this regard, the main discursive framings identified in the communications between Oxfam, SHAD, and the critics, include: securing ones position to avoid compromise, striving for insider/outsider coordination, motivating others to change their position, and managing relationships with adversaries.

Securing ones position and avoiding compromise

As the interaction between the different NGO groups progressed, it became clear that there was less and less room for compromise. Instead, each group continued to secure its position by initiating independent actions that required little or no coordination with other NGOs.

The critical NGOs deemed that by engaging in more active advocacy activities they could better secure their position against certification in the shrimp aquaculture industry. The alliance determined to strengthen their global network by moving cohesively towards more active dialogue with both industry and other NGO groups. In their view, a more active presence at international conferences and meetings would help to ensure that grassroots viewpoints were heard and recognized. In order to further secure their position, the critical NGOs discussed demanding a moratorium on further expansion of the shrimp aquaculture industry, as well as deploying some sort of global action to motivate consumers in importing countries to reduce their consumption of shrimps.

Somewhat different, Oxfam's strategy to secure its position in the debate was grounded on ensuring the articulation of recognized international social principles in the SHAD standard. In particular, Oxfam's contribution to the development of social criteria for principles three and four of the standard– develop and operate farms with consideration for surrounding communities and operate farms with responsible labor practices, respectively – were anchored in internationally recognized contract farming, child and forced labor standards, minimum and fair wages, working conditions, compensation and discrimination, transparency, and complaints guidelines.

In turn, SHAD members aimed to strengthen the certification initiative by having Oxfam become full steering member of the ASC, as it continued to parley and facilitate between the interests of the initiative and its critics. Oxfam estimated that by engaging more proactively in SHAD/ASC and joining the Global Steering Committee with decision-making capacity, it would be better able to influence the outcomes of the governance process. Accordingly, Oxfam decided to join the Global Steering Committee, while maintaining its own right to leave the ASC in case it failed to deliver. From this position, Oxfam sought to create improved social standards that could also serve for similar government-driven initiatives.

Striving for insider/outsider coordination

Even though Oxfam and the critical NGOs failed to find common ground on their views about certification in general and SHAD in particular, they continued to pursue a few synergies in the context of improving the shrimp aquaculture sector. For instance, the critical NGOs identified

Oxfam as a potential donor that could cover attendance fees to international conferences and meetings, travel expenses, and alliance meetings. Similarly, Oxfam remained committed to supporting the participation of local NGOs in aquaculture-related initiatives so that Southern voices could be heard in global governance processes.

In Oxfam's view, forming an alliance with the critical NGOs helped to prevent it from getting co-opted, manage brand risks and avoid being criticized by other NGOs, allowing it to deploy a good cop/bad cop strategy, and to receive from those outside the process new information to strengthen its own lobbying capacity. Oxfam also believed that deploying a strategy based on insider/outsider coordination involving the critical NGOs would allow it to develop more intense communication and consultation with local grassroots organizations. With this strategy, Oxfam fought to create spaces of influence for the critical voices inside SHAD and to fund research that would better reveal the benefits and limitations of certification for shrimp farmers.

Pushing others to change their views or position

The critical NGOs were determined to get Oxfam to revise and amend its position towards certification in general and the SHAD in particular. Some members of the critical NGO alliance suggested that Oxfam engage with the SHAD/ASC as an outsider from an alternative advocacy platform from which it could independently demand improvements to the standard. Other recommendations made by the critical NGOs to Oxfam included relocating responsibility and resources for the shrimp sector away from the Private Sector Program and into a Regional Program, funding a monitoring and watchdog structure to keep an eye on shrimp certification initiatives, launching a consumer campaign, and responding formally to the conclusion of the bilateral discussions held between Oxfam and the critical NGOs.

When the critical alliance called on Oxfam to join them in boycotting the shrimp aquaculture industry, Oxfam refused, bringing forward a more nuanced view of the livelihood threats and opportunities the sector offered, as well as the possibility to apply mitigation strategies rather than sheer rejection of certification as change mechanism. The insider/outsider coordination strategy originally envisioned by Oxfam ultimately failed because the different approaches and interests of both NGO groups could not become aligned.

Managing relationships with adversaries

The points raised by the critical NGOs at various stages of their interaction had made Oxfam sensible to the need for a better definition and integration its intervention strategy in governance arrangements, such as SHAD. Oxfam welcomed the complaint put forward by the critical NGOs as a way to ensure accountability, both to its partners and constituents, and to highlight the need for improved messaging both inside and outside the organization. This, particularly in terms of its position regarding certification and the different alternatives that could help make the shrimp aquaculture sector more sustainable. Resulting from this process, Oxfam decided to remain critically associated with SHAD in the form of a technical advisor during the implementation phase, without publicly endorsing the shrimp standard.

Moreover, this pushed Oxfam to reflect on the conditions under which it would agree to collaborate with, facilitate, or reconsider its theory of change to reflect the concerns of the critical NGOs. While acceding to fund some activities of this NGO group and facilitate face-to-face meetings, Oxfam remained determined to defend its right to decide how to best allocate resources and organize internally. In this case, Oxfam remained committed towards advocating and mobilizing the power of the private sector to improve corporate policy and practice as a means to bring change. The strategy of Oxfam's allies to manage its adversaries was less

forthcoming. SHAD opted for sustaining limited bilateral communication with the critical NGOs, based on the argument that the alliance had already been invited to take part in and express their views during the Shrimp Dialogue meetings held in Asia and Latin America.

43. ■ Maintaining independence while securing interdependence

When I began writing this chapter I was particularly curious about understating the interactions between different types of NGOs. As this study has shown, NGOs that are active in the same organizational field may frame issues differently, which in turn shapes their relationship. The case of Oxfam and the critical NGOs made apparent the tensions that emerged between NGOs pursuing gradual change in the shrimp aquaculture sector, on the one side, and more fundamental change, on the other.

Additionally, this case showed that depending on how conflictive and fixed frames are, a larger or lesser degree of collaboration between the different NGOs is possible. With frames differing on one or more of the attributes (ontological, normative, and strategic), attempts to collaborate can easily become problematic. If framing of the issue from both sides is rather fixed, there will be few opportunities to reconcile the different perceptions of the problem through the interaction process.

When Oxfam decided to facilitate dialogue and interaction between the critical NGOs and SHAD, it did so based on the assumption that both NGO groups could gain more from working together, given that they aimed for the same goal. However, time proved this assumption to be incorrect. What this shows us is that an NGO that aims to fulfill an intermediary role between NGOs that hold conflicting frames needs to ask first whether the context is such that it will be able to in fact play this role.

In the case of Oxfam, the NGO seems to have judged the initial situation as one where all NGOs shared significant commonality at the ontological and normative level, with the differences mainly located at the strategic level. This misinterpretation posed important implications throughout the whole interaction process, for the critical NGOs conceived the situation as one with strong normative and strategic differences at play from the get go. While Oxfam could have chosen to operate independently from the critical NGOs from the moment it realized that its initial assumptions were incorrect, it continued to try to reconcile its position in an attempt to crystallize a good/bad cop intervention strategy.

Accordingly, a second related question that needs to be asked by an NGO taking an intermediary role and seeking insider/outsider coordination is whether it is actually in the right position to play such role, particularly in relation to its independence from all the other parties involved in the issue. In this respect, the internal reflections of Oxfam also seem to have neglected this. Oxfam conceived its intermediary role on a strategic consideration of its own; namely, the idea that it could improve its own collaborative power in the relationship with SHAD if the pressure of the more pronounced and fundamentally critical frames could be used as a form of backing.

Even though this backing might have granted Oxfam with more clout to influence the SHAD process, in addition to the related GlobalGAP and FAO processes, it rendered it vulnerable to scrutiny from the more radical NGOs. In this scenario, Oxfam was forced to deal with the additional and related risk of securing its independence in the interaction process.

In a situation in which NGO frames conflict on a particular issue, as long as there is some conformity at the ontological level, some aspects may fit in a particular theory of change in order to give “the others among equals” a voice in the process of change. In fact, under these circumstances, variety at the strategic level between NGOs might not only be tolerable, but also preferable as groups might deploy complementary actions. However, as this case showed, conflicting positions at the ontological or normative level will seldom become reconciled.

A third consideration has to do with the connection between the frames enacted by an NGO and the roles that it is consequently able to play. In other words, holding a particular frame has implications on what an NGO is able to do. Multiple NGO roles, like advocacy, campaigning, and collaboration, as well as the related insider and outsider positions, can only be coupled up to a certain extent. For example, if an NGO works with allies on a particular intervention, its ability to work on other projects with different frames might place it in a conflicting relationship, which could compromise its own position. This holds true for both sides: proponents and opponents.

In this regard, I observed that efforts made by Oxfam and the critical NGOs to accommodate each other’s views and demands resulted in a serious accountability dilemma. With most interaction attempts becoming dedicated to clarify each other’s position, their particular contribution to solving the more critical questions surrounding shrimp certification became obscured. Questions related to land rights, economic justice, genetically modified organisms, and public and private policy, were left largely unaddressed in the course of interaction.

Similarly, because Oxfam and the critical NGOs devoted so much of their time and energy to dealing with each other, they left other “tables” rather unattended. In the case of Oxfam, this meant that although it managed to ensure upward accountability to the private sector, Oxfam International, and SHAD, it failed to deliver downward accountability in the form of concrete results for its NGO partners in developing countries, local communities, and the dissenting voices of the SHAD process (including the critical NGOs).

Another critical question concerns the claims made to SHAD in relation to the issue of representativeness. While the critical NGOs claimed to be the most able to represent the interests of local communities and small farmers, Oxfam also had partners in developing countries and claimed to represent the same category of interests. This ambiguous situation only brought confusion and noise to the conversation.

Moreover, the claims condemning SHAD of not having been open enough to critical voices were frequent when, in fact, the process had been open to public scrutiny. What NGOs have realized in this regard is that the availability of public consultation procedures does not automatically lead to the effective inclusion and participation of a diversity of stakeholders. Here, empowering specific social groups seems to be the missing ingredient to ensure that critical voices can make appropriate use of this mechanism and affect the content of the standard. In the case of SHAD, it was precisely because of the lack of serious consideration of the claims made by the critical NGOs, that the content of the standard received less attention than the governance process itself.

Drawing again on the chess metaphor, when Oxfam International’s Director was asked to arbitrate between Oxfam Novib and critical NGOs, his role was in fact to determine whether the match had been fair. In this sense, it is interesting to ask whether the game was about winning or losing chess pieces, or whether it was about winning a game, or winning several games, or not losing any chess pieces or games, or playing fairly for that matter. Here, I am referring to winning specific criteria in the SHAD standard, winning at the SHAD board on inclusive processes, winning at the critical NGO board about complementary approaches, and

not being willing to lose any of these points even if it meant winning the match against the private sector.

Oxfam was very ambitious in what it wanted to achieve in the multiple-table game: it aimed to get specific social criteria in the SHAD standard, to get the interests of critical actors considered at the ASC table, to play fairly at the critical NGO table, and to maintain policy coherence at the Oxfam International table. Even if Oxfam did win a number of games in the SHAD table, in terms of standard content and process, the fair play question at the opponent NGO table turned the greater game into a win or lose discussion between differing theories of change. In this scenario, Oxfam winning specific chess pieces or games against SHAD or the private sector became less relevant for the critical NGOs.

At the end of 2013, the shrimp standard was released and Oxfam determined to end its participation in SHAD's Global Steering Committee. Still, many sustainability challenges in the shrimp aquaculture sector remain to be addressed. Neither the shrimp standard nor the ASC body covers the full spectrum of issues that are important to Oxfam in the context of shrimp farming. For instance, the issue of fish feed is yet to be better managed, as well as aspects related to standard verification and quality, incentives to better link markets, involving buyers and investors, and testing the claims of each certification system.

As for the critical NGOs, they are still active in developing countries, as well as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden mainly. They continue to operate as a virtual alliance of like-minded actors, who do not hold a common view or position about every single topic. In this vein, I would imagine that another multiple-table situation is at play within their alliance.

As for what this study can contribute to our understanding of NGO interactions, it shows how differing claims among NGOs active in the same organizational field can result in a multiple-table situation. Such situation demands a balancing exercise from NGOs, so that they are able to maintain their independence while managing interdependence with other actors. This situation can often result in an NGO compromising its own position, which might be prevented if the NGO stays firm about its own framing of the problem, scrutinizing the frames of others resolutely, and having a clear definition of the different roles it plays and how these relate to each other.

While participating in private governance arrangements, Oxfam had to manage a multitude of relationships and play many roles, requirements that are not unique to this NGO. The partnership trend, along with the privatization of regulation, and the new market-based development approach, demand that international NGOs take a variety, and often competing, positions. In particular within the sustainability field, actors are likely to face contradictory visions of how societal change is to be achieved. As somebody at Oxfam put it,

"...these debates are not between Oxfam and partners, but between NGOs everywhere."

Accordingly, NGOs that adopt fewer and more defined roles and positions have a clearer story to tell. But international NGO confederations that use wide a range of intervention approaches, like Oxfam, need to make extra efforts to explain to others what their work is all about. Specifically related to Private Sector initiatives, taking both collaborative and confrontational positions towards businesses, presents an extra set of challenges.

In particular, the apparent incompatibility between these approaches often creates confusion among the external and internal audiences of an NGO. It also places tension on its theory of change and the intervention strategies that complement it. However, NGOs do not need to be in good terms with everyone all the time. In fact, they will always need to engage with groups

that have a clear mandate for creating resistance. Here, displaying a consistent profile, along with achieving the right coordination with external actors – including the fiercer critics in the field – is what will determine the ability of an NGO to deal with a multiple-table situation.

44. Concluding thoughts

The title of this book makes reference to the different positions an action researcher can take in relation to the object of inquiry and the rest of the participants involved in the study. But it also makes reference to the position an NGO can take in the context of private sector interventions. To this end, this part of the book studied the interaction between a number of NGOs, some which chose to engage in a multi-stakeholder governance initiative from the inside and others that remained at the outside.

When Oxfam decided to engage with SHAD it chose to do so using a critical insider strategy, providing input to develop social criteria to certify shrimp aquaculture producers. From this position, Oxfam played a number of roles throughout the standard development process. It played the role of technical expertise, critical monitor, and co-promoter. But, most importantly, it played an intermediary role, linking the actors in SHAD with those outside the arrangement. Most notably, Oxfam acted as a facilitator between organizations that held reformative views about how to transform the mainstream shrimp aquaculture industry into a more responsible sector and organizations that held a more radical position.

As intermediary between the insiders and outsiders, Oxfam sought to create spaces for autonomous input from the latter group. The idea here was that through coordinated action between insiders and outsiders, a stricter and more nuanced private standard would be delivered by SHAD. As the analysis showed, in this case insider/outsider coordination failed due to the irreconcilable frames held by Oxfam and the critical NGOs. The importance of such coordination also applies to the interaction between researcher and participants in action research projects.

When I started working on the research for this part of the book, my time at Oxfam Novib was almost coming to an end. I had six months left in the organization, most of which I spent collecting the data for this project. During this time, I felt much more autonomous as I had forged a good relationship with the people involved in shrimp aquaculture work and it was clear whom I needed to interview and where I could find the information I needed.

This was mostly because in the time I had spent with practitioners we had managed to align our views and reach a compromise in what we wanted to achieve with this research project. The boundaries between me being an outsider or an insider had become increasingly blurred with time. Even though I had been able to retain the position of a critical insider for most of the time, the fact that I was leaving the organization soon, forced the Private Sector Team and myself to think of me as a friendly outsider again.

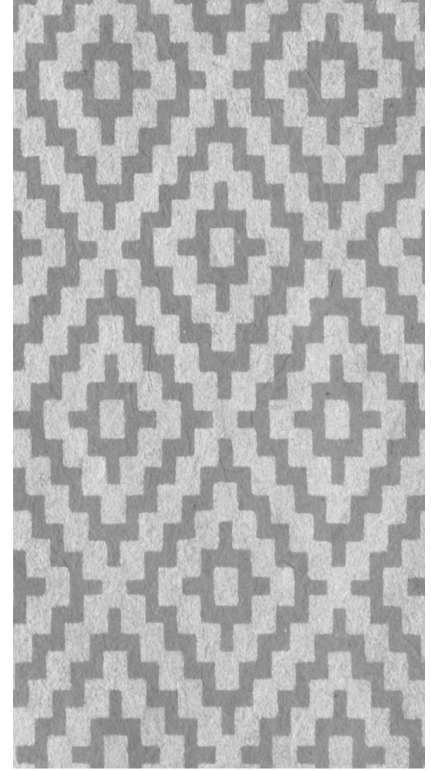
My last days at Oxfam Novib went on as business as usual. When the time came, I took my things back to Utrecht University, but continued to keep contact with some members of the Private Sector Team as I finalized my research. Together with the Private Sector Coordinator, I agreed that I would continue attending the monthly Private Sector Team meeting in order to keep our conversation going. In these subsequent meetings, I discussed my research with them and took note of the latest developments in the Program.

What was most notable in this regard was how easily we agreed on the interpretation and results of this part of the research. Here, I noticed how much our communication had improved with time and how I could now present the information in ways that were more useful for their practice. The fact that I had become familiarized with the organization and the aims and assumptions of the Private Sector Program also played an important role without doubt.

In terms of the analysis of Oxfam's interaction with the critical NGOs, the Private Sector Team agreed on the usefulness of making a distinction between the ontological, normative, and strategic framing attributes. This framework helped to uncover the different elements of their shrimp aquaculture theory of change and how they were linked together. The Private Sector Team also realized that, in future occasions, their work could benefit from performing an ex ante analysis of the theory of change in order to establish long-term intervention objectives and to define how the different strategies linked their assumptions about relations and outcomes.

In this sense, I consider that the outcomes of this research project helped to highlight the importance of doing such analyses before engaging in a multi-stakeholder governance arrangement and drawing an intervention strategy based on coordination with other NGOs. This ex post analysis of Oxfam's implicit shrimp aquaculture theory of change revealed how Oxfam could have adapted its intervention strategy the moment it identified the irreconcilable views held by the critical NGOs. Arguably, because it did not have this information at that time, Oxfam was faced with little choice but to continue to try and reconcile its position.

Although a framework based on ontological, normative, and strategic framing attributes will most likely display some grey areas or overlaps between the three dimensions, it offers a systematic outline to analyze the underlying assumptions and normative views of any organization. This is particularly relevant for NGOs as their strategic actions, or tactical repertoires, are primarily motivated by their ontological and normative views of the world.



PART VI

Conclusions and Reflection

45. **Employing private sector engagement as change strategy**

As I mentioned at the end of Part I of this book, this research project has yielded insights at three, interconnected levels. Although in the next chapters I discuss each separately, the previous parts of this book showed how, in reality, analysis occurs at these three levels in an interwoven fashion. In the process of conducting action research, it is often difficult to separate what is relevant from the perspective of theory and practice. Theoretical insights emerge to support or challenge practical considerations and vice versa. What I hope to illustrate in this study is the way in which they become interconnected, making it difficult to say where one ends and the other begins.

First, the empirical evidence obtained from analyzing Oxfam's Private Sector Program allows saying something *about* Oxfam's engagement with the private sector. Second, the evidence obtained in the realization of this project offers insights that are relevant *for* Oxfam. And third, this book offers an insider's look into how this research project was realized. Let me discuss here the first level.

In early June 2014, I was invited to attend the 3rd Regional Meeting of PRME in Latin America and the Caribbean, which was held at EGADE Business School in México City, my current place of work. PRME stands for Principles for Responsible Management Education and was created in 2007 by an international task force of sixty deans, university presidents, and representatives of leading business schools. The development of these principles followed after a recommendation of the United Nations' Global Compact to create a global engagement platform for academic institutions. PRME'S principles aim to integrate the aspects of purpose, values, method, research, partnership, and dialogue in management education.

As I sat listening to the different speakers, something resonated with my research. This had to do with the increased involvement of non-state actors in regulating social affairs. Whether it is NGOs, CSOs, businesses, private foundations, or business schools, there is sufficient agreement about the fact that private actors have a lot to contribute when it comes to dealing with and regulating aspects related to sustainability, poverty, climate change, corruption, and security. In the case of PRME, business schools have been asked to join this international platform in order to form more committed and responsible leaders.

This example goes to show the increasing role that private actors are playing in global governance. In a context in which the state's capacity to govern is said to be continuously shrinking, universities, NGOs, and businesses are required to take over newly emerging tasks. For this, they need allies, resources, and a specific expertise. What is considerably novel in the field of the environment and development is the increasing interaction between NGOs and businesses. Indeed, NGOs have become particularly dynamic when it comes to forming alliances and engaging with businesses.

With the advent of the financial crisis of 2009, many NGOs stopped receiving some of the grants and government subsidies that they were once entitled to. Consequently, some of them began to turn to the private sector for funds. Generally speaking, NGOs receive funds from the private sector for two main purposes: either to fulfil their philanthropic activities – a more instrumental motive – or in exchange for the legitimacy and expertise that comes with a NGO's

name – a more principled motive. The latter case usually involves firms that are frontrunners in their sector and their interaction with NGOs comprises an exchange of complementary resources.

This type of alliances provide both parties with access to skills, competences, and capabilities different from those that are available within their own organization or that might result from same-sector partnerships. In this regard, another of the primary aspects that international NGOs bring to collaborations with the private sector is access to their networks. NGOs help the private sector to develop new capabilities to deal with social and environmental issues, and they also provide unique, on-the-ground relationships with local actors.

Previous research on intersectoral partnerships and roundtables discussed the contributions of such governance arrangements to the creation of voluntary certification standards and the promotion of more sustainable products (Bitzer, Francken, & Glasbergen, 2008; Blowfield, 2003; Goldbach, Back, & Seuring, 2003; see Vermeulen & Ras, 2006). Here, most emphasis was placed on a particular arrangement. Contributing to this, my research has further illustrated the strategies deployed by international NGOs, such as Oxfam, in private governance arrangements and the range of interactions that take place in these networks of multiple actors.

In terms of what this research found *about* Oxfam, this research project has contributed to depict NGO interactions around the articulation of rights-based principles in private sector interventions, as well as the tensions that might emerge between different organizations bounded by a shared concern, but conflicted by their views about the solution to a problem.

In this sense, examining Oxfam's case has revealed that NGOs working in the same issue-field or using a similar approach have been quick to recognize, reinforce, and exploit their relational networks in order to build upon them and develop new network connections where appropriate. As studies on resource mobilization and networking have shown, international NGOs have for long grounded large part of their theories of change on what they can achieve together with or thanks to their external relationships (Bendell & Eilersiek, 2009; Glasbergen, 2010; Gulati, 1998).

As Part V of the book showed, engaging with other organizations, particularly in the position of intermediary or facilitator, requires that an NGO is prepared to manage interdependence with other actors, while still being able to secure its own independence. Here, the idea is that NGOs will sometimes need to (re)shape or (re)consider their vision or belief when collaborating with others. Finding compromise to move the project forward, while still remaining independent from the others, is the challenge.

In the particular case of NGO-business collaboration around the creation of private standards, both parties pool their resources and expertise for the creation of a new certification scheme designed to regulate an entire sector, providing market incentives for more responsible production. Private and public regulation, however, are built on the interests and needs of different constituencies and are thus backed by different sources of legitimacy. While public regulation is largely supported by the democratic structures of which it is part, private regulation draws on different sources of legitimacy, such as morality or consequentiality (Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011).

During the many conversations I held with practitioners at Oxfam Novib, the assumption that private regulation might serve as precursor of public regulation was often used to substantiate Oxfam's involvement in the creation of private certification schemes. In reality, it is not uncommon that hard and soft law coexist. In fact, the creation of private regulation often serves as a space for societal learning that provides the necessary timeframe to generate sufficient

consensus so that, eventually, voluntary norms might become binding regulation. Of course, some actors might also use private regulation as a means to stall the formal regulatory process in order to continue operating according to the status quo.

With time, I also became aware of the fact that public and private regulation might either support or compete with each other. Solely regarding private regulation as precursor of public regulation can result in a chicken and egg dilemma, thus ignoring other potentially interesting connections between the two.

For instance, thinking of ways in which private and public regulation might be supportive for each other offers actors with more room to act within their particular spheres. In addition to provoking societal learning and consensus, private regulation in the form of voluntary standards, offers a more efficient way of regulating corporate behaviour through the exchange of best practices, which can be more easily adopted and replicated by means of providing incentives – the carrot – instead of threatening with sanctions – the stick.

In the field of sustainability, private and public regulation are likely to continue to coexist. In this context, finding points of convergence between formal regulatory frameworks and innovative private standards is likely to become increasingly important, alongside the applicability and verification of the standard in question.

In this scenario, finding mutually reinforcing mechanisms, for instance in terms of a company being given certain allowances because of its compliance with a particular voluntary code, could become a new interesting task for NGOs advocating for private regulation as a change mechanism.

Accounting for opportunities and risks

Studying the case of Oxfam has shown us that NGOs, which employ private sector engagement as a change strategy, need to become aware of and account for a number of risks and opportunities. Some of the most important include:

Opportunities:

- i. A culture of trust: Multi-stakeholder collaboration opens up the possibility of generating trust among competitors or organizations from different sectors that would otherwise remain disconnected or suspicious of each other.
- ii. Shared interests: Collaboration implies that each group of actors must identify the objectives it seeks to achieve through the engagement, as well as to recognize the value they stand to gain from achieving shared commitments with other actors.
- iii. Progressive engagement: Engaging with a firm around a particular sustainability initiative offers the opportunity to start working a small number of like-minded actors. With time, and once the initiative becomes more consolidated, NGOs can invite subsequent tiers of participants to join in the arrangement.
- iv. Progressive change: When engaging with businesses, NGOs are able to gain momentum by initially focusing on the quick wins or low-hanging fruit, and only coming to address the more controversial issues once trust and interdependence have been secured.

Risks:

- i. Selecting the right partners: Participants or partners need to be carefully selected at each stage of the collaboration process so that having the right mix of participants can help create a successful initiative. For instance, organizations with strong normative models, as well as fierce proponents or opponents of the initiative, will leave little room for negotiation or compromise.
- ii. Conflicting visions: Participants of multi-stakeholder initiatives are required to create a shared vision of what changes need to be pursued and the means through which they can be achieved. They will need to negotiate conflicting visions and interests in order for the initiative to move forward, as well as to agree on the appropriate governance model of the initiative.
- iii. Free-riding: Multi-stakeholder collaboration is likely to be vulnerable to free-riding from one or more parties. To overcome this situation, firm and clear commitments need to be agreed on at the onset of the engagement.
- iv. Reconciliation of interests: Sustainability initiatives that rely on the market as the coordinating mechanism might come in conflict with realizing the social or environmental goals of the initiative. In order to mitigate this risk, the right incentive structure needs to be in place so that actors are motivated to pursue concomitant objectives.
- v. Quantification of gains: Often it is difficult to quantify how the collaboration will bring value, whether it be financial, in terms of human rights, or protecting the environment, to the parties involved. Businesses might be solely focused on reducing costs or generating revenue, which might prevent them from reaping other benefits of the collaboration.

Managing private sector engagement

In terms of managing NGO-business interactions, Oxfam Novib's latest organizational development suggests that a more autonomous and cohesive structure might be more appropriate than a matrix one, where private sector interventions are deployed in a cross-cutting fashion. Allow me to explain.

With the idea to *keep the conversation going*, in October 2013, I met with a few members of the Private Sector Team to get an update about the changes that had taken place in Oxfam since I had left. In the last year, they told me, private sector work had become more and more institutionalized within Oxfam. The Private Sector Program, as it existed before, was dissolved and converted into a department with own budget, mandate, and employees.

A new department called Business for Development Unit now manages private sector work at Oxfam Novib. Engagement with businesses, they explained, would no longer be articulated into existing programs as a cross-cutting theme; rather, private sector interventions would now be designed and managed by the Business for Development Unit.

Through the Business for Development Unit a more comprehensive type of interventions could be designed. In this scenario, private sector interventions would now integrate components from various organizational departments under a common overriding goal, instead of being isolated efforts here or there, wherever opportunity arose.

The new palm oil strategy is a case in point. The strategy tackles the sector from different angles including mobilizing consumers, campaigning against non-complying companies,

working with smallholders and communities in securing their land rights, lobbying governments to better enforce national regulation, and working with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil to verify and improve the standard.

Such a management response, which involves organizational (re)structuring and design, poses advantages and disadvantages for overcoming some of the critical issues identified in this research project. For example, analysing Oxfam's intervention portfolio showed that managing interaction with businesses across organizational departments yielded a fragmented engagement strategy. Each organizational department held its own view about the role of business, thus approaching companies with different purposes.

What this brought was a great number of disconnected activities and, most importantly, great confusion, both internally and externally, about Oxfam's motives and assumptions for engaging with the private sector. Part IV of this book provided evidence of loose synergy across departments and little coherence among the underlying theories of change of their different initiatives. Part IV of the book also discussed the importance of achieving balance in any particular portfolio configuration. In the case of Oxfam's private sector portfolio, balance could be largely described in terms of collaborative versus confrontational interventions, working alone versus working with others, and the different roles that Oxfam is able to play in this regard.

Arguably, because of Oxfam's collaborative outlook (i.e. one of its organizational core competencies), a greater number of private sector interventions will be of this type, while only a few interventions will be of a confrontational nature. Yet, the relative importance of confrontational interventions will continue to increase as they help to legitimize Oxfam's critical position on a number of issues. Oxfam's public campaigns, as well as its outsider position regarding certain initiatives, contribute to publicly position the organization in terms of its ideals and objectives.

In this vein, it is very likely that Oxfam's private sector portfolio will continue to be made of interventions carried out in collaboration with other NGOs or like-minded actors. These types of alliances offer benefits from an NGO's perspective, not only in terms of resource mobilization, but also in terms of the aggregated effects that can be achieved by pooling the actions of many. The main difficulty in this regard will relate to the definition of the roles that each organization plays in the collaboration.

The creation of the Business for Development Unit at Oxfam Novib will most likely contribute to overcome fragmentation and create synergy among interventions, while also allowing Oxfam to offer a more integrated value proposition towards businesses. Here, the Business for Development Unit will be able to manage the intervention from start to finish, thus generating more robust and testable theories of change. Other advantages include improving relationship management with external stakeholders and communicating a more consistent organizational profile.

On the contrary, this new organizational model will not help solve the recurrent political risks associated to deploying a rights-based approach to development. Public denunciation from critical actors that oppose to Oxfam collaborating with the private sector and its model of change, in addition to the issue of weighting human rights aspects versus environmental and economic aspects, as well as the organizational competencies cutting across factual stakes, will most likely continue to place Oxfam Novib under stress. What remains to be seen is whether this new organizational structure can help mitigate some of these tensions.

46 ■ Identifying constraints in the articulation of rights-based approaches in private sector interventions

When I first arrived in Oxfam, I was impressed by the way in which they had established private sector interventions as a cross-cutting issue along its different departments: lobbying and advocacy, campaigning and popular mobilization, and in-country development programs. Private sector work had gained recognition and it was becoming more and more institutionalized among Oxfam's interventions. In the last decade, a few initiatives had given way for a more structured approach towards working with companies. Now, engagement with the private sector was not an isolated effort; it had become a big part of Oxfam's identity and was encoded in its organizational DNA.

In this scenario, Oxfam faced important questions about the articulation about rights-based principles in private sector interventions and the implications therein. As I stated in Part I and II of this book, these questions triggered the realization of this study to a large extent. This chapter discusses the findings that are relevant *for* Oxfam in this regard. The fact that Oxfam engages with the private sector from the normative standpoint of human rights implies at least three main constraints; the first two relate to private sector engagement in general, while the third concerns certification schemes created through multi-stakeholder governance arrangements in particular:

First, engaging with the private sector from the perspective of rights begs the question of whether businesses are prepared for and capable of fulfilling human rights obligations. The protection and enforcement of human rights has been traditionally an affair between citizens and governments. The role of corporations in securing people's rights – or at least in not violating them – is a relatively recent perspective, which has been largely promoted by the United Nations through the Protect, Respect, Remedy Framework (Hamann, 2009; Ruggie, 2008).

Since this is a new responsibility for most firms, it implies that NGOs will need to work on building the capacities of the private sector to fulfil a new set of obligations. Actions in this regard might include anything from raising awareness, to helping businesses integrate a human rights dimension into corporate policy, to creating alternative dispute resolution facilities.

A second related constraint relates to a certain vulnerability brought by the adoption of a rights-based approach. Working from this more or less clear and normative approach renders NGOs vulnerable to disagreement with other actors, as they might have a different interpretation or practical application of the concept. In this sense, considerations about the articulation of rights-based principles in private sector interventions, and their subsequent operationalization, are in order.

In terms of the articulation of rights-based principles, I have suggested that one of the advantages of pursuing development from a human rights perspective is the ambiguity and flexibility of the concept itself. The fact that there is no one type of rights-based approach, but a collection of them, allows for NGOs to formulate interventions from a perspective that is consequent with its mission and resources.

In order to avoid leaving the deployment of rights-based approaches open to personal or organizational interpretations, setting boundaries on how this might be done can help to warrant coherence. In fact, such a framework could also help formulate theories of change in a more consistent manner and ensure that actions are pondered against specific parameters (e.g. those established and agreed upon at the national or international level).

Further, this could also serve to better identify and communicate the assumptions underlying the theory of change, both to internal and external audiences, and to test their validity before making decisions about whether to engage or not in a particular intervention. For instance, Part III of this book revealed how analyzing a private sector intervention from a human rights perspective helps to shed light on particular development outcomes. In this case, it became possible to see why Oxfam assumed that multi-stakeholder governance arrangements can open new spaces of participation for local communities and why this, in turn, can help them secure their rights to food and land ownership.

In this context, it is important to note that NGOs and firms will need to reconcile the inherent conflicts between fundamental rights (see Brems, 2008), in addition to the weight that is allocated to human rights aspects in relation to economic and environmental considerations. This research showed how Oxfam is constantly forced to bargain between the many normative principles it advocates: human rights *versus* environmental concerns, representation *versus* inclusion, development *versus* conservation, global markets *versus* local producers, etc. In private sector interventions, the protection of human rights will occasionally be subjected to the realization of environmental or economic objectives. This forces rights-based NGOs to accept losing some battles in order to win the war.

When I started reading about rights-based approaches, one of the aspects that I found underexplored in the literature was the practical application or operationalization of rights-based approaches. Most of the literature focuses on the conceptualization of such approaches (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Hickey & Mitlin, 2009b), but only few studies show how rights-based approaches look and work in practice (Chopra & Ford, 2005; Sarelín, 2007; Schmidt-Traub, 2009).

To my surprise, I found that people at Oxfam had little clarity of what being a rights-based NGO meant for their practice. Even though most practitioners had good knowledge of the distinct human rights enforcement mechanisms, in addition to formed opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the approach, each person had his/her own particular understanding about how to best use the approach in his/her work. Specifically within the Private Sector Team, I noted that there was little rigor when it came to applying a human rights perspective in private sector interventions.

This goes to show that the lack of consistency in making the concept operational did not result from a lack of knowledge but, rather, from the ambiguity of the concept and the variety of interpretations that it was subjected to. Additionally, the fact that human rights principles needed to become articulated in a wide range of private sector interventions further complicated the matter.

In order for NGOs to make rights-based approaches operational, they need to establish their own criteria. Human rights include a wide range of action areas and each NGO needs to specify which rights are relevant for its general practice, as well as for specific interventions. Oxfam, for example, chose to group its activities under five broad human rights categories. Earlier parts of this book discussed this in detail, showing that it has been an effective way to organize its activities and vision for a more just world without poverty.

Oxfam's private sector work, however, would likely benefit from a more explicit description of the rights or principles to be pursued in a particular intervention. This should become formulated in theories of change and intervention strategies.

A third constrain has to do with the inherent limitations of private governance arrangements – as a specific type of private sector intervention – to promote and enforce a number of rights-based principles that are central to Oxfam's goals: power and inequality, exclusion, representation, and accountability and transparency.

Power and Inequality

Private, multi-stakeholder governance arrangements are not arenas where discussions about fundamental issues can be held. The fact that such initiatives seek consensus, implies that general agreements must be made. Due to this inherent limitation of multi-stakeholder governance, it is likely that discussions on the controversial issues of power and inequality will most likely be left unmentioned. Even though the potentials of private governance for redistributing power and eradicating inequality are, in my opinion, limited, this is not to say that they are futile. In fact, what a human rights perspective offers in this regard is the possibility to map power imbalances and become aware of them so that criteria about decision-making or financial contributions can be weighted in a more realistic and fair way.

Additionally, other controversial issues, like the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or the definition of what makes something "sustainable", do not leave much room for negotiation or consensus. Two cases analyzed in this research revealed how participants of such arrangements aimed to circumvent contentious discussions: Members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil opted to define "sustainable palm oil" as complying with a number of minimum criteria that they managed to agree on, while members in the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues failed to prohibit the use of genetically modified feed in shrimp farms, thus losing the support of NGOs who openly opposed the use of genetically modified organism.

Exclusion

Even though multi-stakeholder governance offers great deliberative potential, it also tends to exclude – willingly or unwillingly – certain discourses. As I showed in Part V of this book, it is likely that the excluded discourses or interests will belong to the most radical critics or society's most excluded groups (see also Schouten, Leroy, & Glasbergen, 2012; van Huijstee et al., 2011).

As I proposed in my study of Oxfam's participation in the RSPO, one of the most effective ways to deal with issues of exclusion is to create new spaces or forms of engagement where such voices can be heard. Examples of this include the creation of the Dispute Settlement Facility within the RSPO and the deployment of an insider-outsider coordination strategy in the context of the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues.

Representation

Related to the point above is the issue of representation, which is also central from a human rights perspective. NGOs like Oxfam claim to represent the interests of specific groups in governance arrangements. They also claim to be accountable towards their constituencies. Of course, the main problem with such statements is the fact that NGO representatives are not democratically elected. The discussion on the democratic credentials of private governance and NGOs has been extensively documented elsewhere (Biermann et al., 2007; Meadowcroft, 2007).

However, in reality more practical issues of representation arise. For instance, Part V of this book showed how there might be situations where two groups of NGOs claim to represent the interests of the same group of constituents, while displaying different positions towards the problem at hand. Accordingly, issues of framing become crucial in multi-stakeholder arenas, not only in relation to issues of representation, but also to issues of power, exclusion, effectiveness, and justice.

Another aspect related to the issue of representation is the difficulty faced by international NGOs when trying to make claims about representing the interests of communities and local NGOs. International NGOs, like Oxfam, will need to continue to look for ways to link their international advocacy activities with lasting impacts on the ground.

And, perhaps more important, is the question of whether international NGOs are the legitimate representatives of groups living in a completely different contexts. Advancing a solution to this dilemma from a rights-based perspective might suggest that NGOs like Oxfam should serve more as facilitators or brokers, instead of representatives. Here, local NGOs would define their own intervention strategies and would make use of the networks of international NGOs to link up to other actors and reach global arenas where certain decisions are made.

Accountability and Transparency

A couple of decades after the emergence of the pioneer certification standards such as Fairtrade and the Forest Stewardship Council, some organizations, including Oxfam, have become more concerned about the viability – rather than the development – of these certification schemes. While most standards are created with the best of intentions, it is often the implementation part that results in more complications. For this reason, Oxfam is now looking to become involved in the verification of standards, rather than in their creation.

Oxfam believes that it can make a greater contribution by focusing on the quality of the principles, the level of strictness, the creation of incentives to link certification efforts to markets, mobilizing citizens to put pressure on traders and investors, and validating the claims of the certifying organization (RSPO, RTRS, and ASC, for example). Through these measures, the accountability of the governance processes can be secured. Likewise, as part of the verification process, it is important that the merits and pitfalls of private certification schemes are publicly discussed and that the governance structures of the arrangements are made publicly available.

47 ■ **Discussing the implications of using action research for scientific and real-world inquiry**

Action research, as a way to design or approach inquiry, is not purposeful for every question or every person. As it has been noted: “For those who have a low tolerance to ambiguity and messiness, action research would probably be best as the path not taken” (Herr and Anderson, 2005: 127). I believe that action research fitted me well, but I certainly hope that it was not because I am either ambiguous or messy.

I consider action research to be a valuable alternative to approach inquiry primarily because of the way it allows researchers to work with others in generating new knowledge and because of the flexibility that allows to combine diverse research methods and techniques. Ultimately, action research aims to produce knowledge that is actionable and which can be used to solve social problems or to create opportunities for mutual reflection and learning. This type of learning that has extensively been studied under the name of transformative learning (see Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1997).

Using action research for scientific and real-world inquiry, however, presents an important set of challenges in terms of the way research projects are designed and conducted, findings are validated and made legitimate, results are written and disseminated, and findings are used and applied. Action research simultaneously constrains and enlarges the area of action of both practitioners and researchers.

Research design and process

Perhaps one of the most difficult things of doing action research is being able to arrive to a good balance between being flexible and being disciplined. When I started my research project I had a sense of the questions I wanted to address and how I would do it. Some aspects that I had considered at the beginning found their way into my research and, ultimately, to this book. Yet, many others got lost or discarded along the way. This is not uncommon or wrong.

As I explained at the beginning of the book, collective inquiry is done together with other people and this means that their views and questions also need to be included in the research process. Initial questions or plans are formulated at the beginning of the study in order to establish a sense of purpose and direction for the participants, but might become altered as the project advances.

In my case, for example, after I had first presented a research proposal to Oxfam practitioners, they suggested that I made some fundamental alterations. Some of this included broadening the scope of the research beyond the study of multi-stakeholder initiatives in order to include other interventions strategies used by Oxfam to engage with businesses. In addition, they suggested that Oxfam Novib should not be the sole object of study, but that other Oxfam affiliates and partner NGOs in developing countries were also included in the research. The outcome of these suggestions can be seen more explicitly in Parts IV and V of this book.

Moreover, once the research process is well on its way, the people involved receive new insights or answers, causing that some elements of the research might become reformulated. In my case, I completed the first objective of the project as it had been established at the beginning of the collaboration with Oxfam: By analyzing of Oxfam's participation in the RSPO, I was able to determine how rights-based approaches became articulated into multi-stakeholder arrangements.

Yet, the second objective that we had initially determined – evaluating the applicability of rights-based strategies towards the private sector in developing countries – did not become systematically studied, as we realized that we needed to first get a better understanding of the way in which private sector interventions were actually organized and managed in the Netherlands, before thinking how they could be carried out in the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) countries.

This meant that the question of how rights-based approaches could be applied to identify new opportunities of interaction with companies in the BRISAM economies was left unresolved. Instead, practitioners at Oxfam and myself decided to focus our efforts towards better comprehending the underlying principles and assumptions that characterized Oxfam's Private Sector interventions, a matter that was thoroughly discussed in Part IV of this book.

In my project, the change of directions from the original research plan were most frequently triggered by specific demands from practitioners or by me acquiring a new perspective because of the insights obtained from my interaction with the Private Sector Team, the results of the research, or both.

This process is closely related to the cycles of action and reflection (Heron & Reason, 1997) discussed in Part I of the book. The four phases suggested by these authors were easy to recognize during the process of my research. Phases one and two, dedicated to agreeing on the focus of the research and engaging on action, were mostly brief. Usually, they were completed after a few conversations with practitioners.

On the contrary, phase three, which entailed deepening our ideas and refining our understanding of the issues we were researching, usually demanded more intense exchange with practitioners. This phase often took the form of long conversations, reviewing preliminary research results and discussing the relevance of one theoretical lens or another. Frequently, it was during this phase when new ideas surfaced or when new directions for the research were agreed upon.

Phase four, usually crystallized when I presented the results of one part of the study, or a proposal for the next, during the Private Sector Team meetings. It was in this phase when it was especially important to establish a clear link between the theoretical and practical implications of the study. Exercises of "translation" of data or theoretical interpretations were essential at this stage.

Accordingly, it is accurate to state that all four phases of the cycles of action and reflection took place in completing each part of the book. Yet, within each of these cycles, there were smaller cycles contained. What I found to be central in the process of moving from one phase to the next was to keep a *constant conversation* between practitioners and myself. This helped to establish a clear sequence of actions and to ensure that the outcomes of each phase fed into the next.

Furthermore, solving real-world, practical problems is not necessarily a straightforward task. For this, meanings are often (re)constructed, emerging knowledge is incorporated, and reflection is linked to action. In my experience with Oxfam, the generation of meaning and

knowledge was often characterized by a need to combine different types of questions and data and go back and forth between theory and practice.

To this end, during the research process I found myself drawing from different epistemologies to answer the different research questions that my project addressed. Action research focuses on specific contexts, demanding that theory and action not be separated. By focusing on context-bound problems, the inquiry process is thus linked to action in order to provide a solution to the problems examined.

The role of theory in action research is a recurrent topic in action research literature, and also one of the most common questions I received while lecturing about action research for a Research Methods class at Utrecht and Maastricht Universities. In these lectures, I emphasized the epistemological foundations of action research, conveying that action research has structure and method.

Similar to grounded theory, I explained, action research draws on theories to make sense of observations, make informed interpretations, and lay out possible scenarios for the future. Such is the case regarding the analytical lenses that I used throughout my project, namely, politics of scale, portfolio analysis, and conversational framing. In this sense, the different parts of this research project showed that, in action research, the nature of the research question is what usually determines the scientific perspective used to answer it. The objective here is that, as the inquiry process advances, the different perspectives become integrated in such a way that the results are relevant for action, while simultaneously proposing a compelling argument.

In this regard, some people have argued that my project constantly balanced between positivist and interpretative epistemological approaches. Indeed, drawing on more positivist approaches helped me to establish a way of knowing and conducting research that was legitimate within academic circles, while the more interpretative approaches helped to add texture and depth to my interaction with practitioners at Oxfam Novib. Overall, I consider that although this project might fall more neatly in the interpretative tradition, drawing on theory and hard facts granted me legitimacy as a researcher and way to support claims made from empirical observations.

Of course, combining research approaches is not without its challenges. As I mentioned previously in my account, there were a few points during the research process in which I became less critical of Oxfam's practice, especially as I became increasingly comfortable in my position as critical insider. Things that would have caught my attention earlier as unique or interesting became part of my daily routine. On several occasions, I had to remind myself, or had my supervisors advising me, to remain engaged but from a more critical and distant position. One of a friendly outsider.

Further reflecting on the insider-outsider dichotomy, somebody once asked me if I had identified at any point of the research process whether someone held the positions of a friendly insider or a critical outsider – as opposed to the critical insider and the friendly outsider. After giving it some thought, I identified the members of the Private Sector Team as the friendly insiders. They were the ones completely immersed in their practice, knowledgeable, and the primary recipients of the results of this investigation. In terms of the critical outsiders, scientists from the positivist tradition were the closest to fit the profile, as their methods and approaches largely differed from my own.

Balancing insider and outsider positions was further complicated by the fact that, as a researcher, I sometimes found myself playing different roles during the inquiry process. For the most part, I tried to act as the friendly outsider who came into the Private Sector Team to place a mirror to their practice. The idea was that in this mirror we, them and me, could see the characteristics, assumption, weaknesses, and strengths that delineated private sector work at

Oxfam Novib. To this end, my role was to guide the reflection process and to conduct the assessment in an organized and coordinated manner.

As I wrote in Part III of the book, accounting for my experience in helping to draft Oxfam's palm oil strategy together with a consultant, there were times when I had to play the role of an expert and in others the role of a student. Often, I wondered how my work was different to that of a consultant. I guess the only thing that separated my work from theirs is the methodological rigor aimed towards making a scientifically sound contribution. In my view, Oxfam did not need to hire external consultants to define its intervention strategies. There was no one better able to do this but Oxfam's Private Sector Team, with all its knowledge and expertise.

Switching between the roles of the friend, the critic, the expert, the student, the researcher, and the colleague demanded an acute sense of awareness from my part. It would have been possible to get lost in the midst of all, but most often I was able to readopt an attitude of inquiry. What this required, was for me to become critical of my own practice, making sure that I maintained a reasonable degree of flexibility, while making sure to demarcate my position as a researcher.

Writing and communicating action research: Reliability and legitimacy

One of the things that first attracted me towards action research was the fact that it aimed to generate knowledge that bridges the *knowledge worlds* of academics and practitioners. I wanted to witness how people in the real world act skillfully on the basis of appropriate and valid knowledge, and to experience how they could serve as essential partners in social research activity. This was all well in concept, but in practice I found that it was difficult to produce interpretations that satisfied the needs of both academics and practitioners.

As I have recorded throughout the book, I often heard from practitioners that my analyses were too abstract, long, and complicated; while the academics labelled my research as simplistic. Both groups differed in their appreciation of the information produced, not only for practical reasons, but because they had varying knowledge interests. Academics wanted a thorough, systematic, and original analysis, while practitioners wanted a fresh perspective on feasible and actionable private sector strategies.

Instead of trying to find convergence between the two worlds, I eventually made the pragmatic decision to conform to the expectations of each group. I would produce two distinct written products, which would be useful in terms of their own standards and needs of their practice. This demonstrates that epistemologies are never innocent, for they serve certain knowledge interests. Throughout the research process I learnt to speak the language of both groups, requiring that I did some (re)interpretation in between, without getting lost in translation.

Accordingly, for the academics, I wrote this book, along with a couple of papers published in scholarly peer-reviewed journals. For practitioners at Oxfam Novib, I wrote a shorter report containing the most salient characteristics of the Private Sector Program. In the context of decentralization that I mentioned before, this report also served as a training tool, teaching other affiliates and country offices about Oxfam's vision of the private sector as an influential actor, the components of its theory of change, and the types of private interventions that it undertakes. The fact that Oxfam Novib used the results of my research to teach others served as a kind of legitimation and validation of the work I had done.

In terms of reliability, writing the dissertation in the form of a journal was a good way to document the research process and to record everything that happened at the backstage of this project. This forced me to be organized and consistent in order to document every conversation, interview, discovery, and list of to-do things during the last four years. While

some people might prefer to do this in a computer and take advantage of all the benefits this offers, I chose to do it in a couple of notebooks and hundreds of post-its. In these notebooks, I can track all the conversations I had with practitioners at Oxfam and with my supervisors.

I believe this technique helped to make sense of the data and to further ensure transparency in the process and results of the inquiry. Journal writing reflects the dynamic and development nature of action research, recreating the key elements in the learning cycles. Through such narratives of experiential learning, real-life events become intertwined with the different types of knowledge.

More specifically, in the initial phase of the inquiry I mostly relied on propositional knowledge to make statements about whom I was and what I wanted to accomplish. I also drew on propositional knowing to learn about ideas and theories, and to express them in propositions or statements that asserted facts about the world. This type of language and conceptualizations were made most evident during meetings with practitioners and with my supervisors, in writing a research proposal, and in establishing the theoretical positioning of my research.

In addition to propositional knowing, experiential knowing played a very important role during the entire research process. Experiential knowing is about meeting people and their worlds, as well as setting the ground for propositional and other types of knowing to emerge. In the first phases of the inquiry, I needed to become open towards practitioners and vice versa. Later, we began to conceptualize ourselves as part of the inquiry process, defining our positions in relation to each other, and the research problem itself.

In the different cycles of the research, we agreed on the focus of the inquiry, using our experience and drawing on propositional ways of knowing to jointly develop the research project. Throughout this process, action and reflection occurred iteratively in such way that one became nested in the other.

Assessing my collaboration with Oxfam: Implications for research and practice

When I left Oxfam Novib in December 2012 there was no farewell or formality. It was a day like any other, with the only difference that in the evening I left The Hague with an extra bag of books and papers. Probably the reason why it did not feel like the end of something was because there was still a lot of work to be done before the research project was concluded.

In fact, it was more than a year later when I met with the Private Sector Coordinator to discuss the outcomes of our collaboration. Had it been worthwhile for both Oxfam and myself? Given what we knew now, what should we have done differently? In what ways did the new knowledge could contribute to improve Oxfam's practice? As a researcher, what type of actions had I been able to initiate? These were some of the questions we explored over a few cups of coffee.

In our assessment we identified a few contributions that this project made to improve Oxfam's practice. First, practitioners often mentioned the opportunity to have an honest and open conversation about their work. In this sense, this project offered a safe space to reflect, document, and communicate about Oxfam's engagement with the private sector. Our conversations served to spark a more critical review of Oxfam's model of change and the assumptions therein, while documenting it offered a new outlet to disseminate Oxfam's work.

In this sense, motivating practitioners to critically reflect on the central aspects of Oxfam's private sector intervention strategy and the corresponding theory of change, allowed them to identify aspects that needed to be corrected or reconsidered. With regards to this, my biggest

expectation is that, as a consequence of the findings and insights offered by this process, practitioners at Oxfam Novib will more openly pursue political objectives in the context of private sector engagement.

Second, in terms of Oxfam's theory of change, this project contributed to uncover the assumptions underlying it and provide a foundation for making it more explicit in the future. Particularly, the need for better establishing the contributions of private sector interventions to protect human rights, and the ways to achieve it, became evident. Additionally, these findings served to prepare training material for Oxfam staff in other affiliates, particularly in developing countries.

In this vein, we hoped to open the rather black box of NGO management and strategy in order to openly discuss the limitations of NGO models of change that are based on business engagement. With this, Oxfam sought to strengthen its accountability towards donors and its constituents, but towards itself too. In an increasingly competitive funding environment, Oxfam hoped that this project would help to establish it in the donor market from a more resolute position. In this sense, conveying a powerful story about the combination of collaborative and confrontation approaches towards the private sector, as well as the different roles played by Oxfam Novib, became an important contribution.

Conversely, some of the factors that complicated the realization of this project had to do with the different timeframes of research and reality, and with the lack of a stricter monitoring of progress. Regarding the mismatch of the time frameworks of research and practice, we found that the timeframes of Oxfam's lobbying and advocacy activities were shorter and much more dynamic than the timeframes of research. For this reason, I sometimes found it difficult to reconcile the different timings in our activities and to ensure that my questions stayed relevant within the organization.

For instance, when I visited Indonesia with some members of the Private Sector Team in 2010, I collected data for Part III of this book and, later, I wrote a paper about Oxfam's participation in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil based on that analysis. The paper became published in 2013, and was one of greatest milestones of this research project. By that time, though, so much had happened regarding Oxfam's intervention in the RSPO! Fortunately, this journal offered a way to compensate for this, allowing me to update and complement information as time went on.

With regards to progress monitoring, we agreed that it would have been helpful to have stricter and more frequent progress monitoring. At the beginning of our collaboration we had put a lot of effort in drafting a contract between Oxfam Novib and Utrecht University, where the responsibilities and commitments of each party were clearly established. Here, we agreed that every six months, practitioners and researchers, including my supervisors, would meet to evaluate the collaboration and decide further steps within the project.

We did this once after the first six months and never again until the very end of the project. This was due to the fact that, with time, the trust that developed between the people involved in the project became more important in determining the actions taken. Everyone was comfortable with the progress of the research and meeting every six months did not seem necessary anymore.

Despite this, we considered that having kept those agreements would have forced us to make a pause and engage more conscientiously in an alternative reflection exercise. Indeed, in action research projects, moments of reflection need to be explicitly defined and guided. This is also linked to the need for the researcher to maintain a more or less constant level of insistence towards his/her co-researchers. It is often the case that researchers start off from a very eager

position to generate new knowledge and create change. But, eventually, this level of insistence declines as participants and researchers become increasingly comfortable in their own positions, each focusing on their own obligations.

Almost five years after having started this project, I can more clearly see the benefits that action research brought to my experience as a researcher. I am pretty sure that if I had not opted for an action research design, I could not have arrived at the same level of insight or interaction in the research process. While general questions about NGO-business engagement could have been addressed by a more traditional approach, looking in detail into the experience of Oxfam offered a unique opportunity to connect a number of scientific interpretations with real life.

In the last years, my experience with action research led me to become interested in action learning, a related but distinct concept that explores how adults learn in action. I believe that both action research and action learning have an important role to play in advancing the sustainability agenda. Research and learning that is done through action enables participants to think critically and work collaboratively to address complex societal problems in more creative ways.

48. Validating research methodology and strategy

This section provides further clarification and reflection about the design of this research project, as well as the methods and theoretical perspectives used to answer the different research questions. Here, I discuss in more detail the ways in which data was collected and analyzed, and how it allowed formulating the conclusions and recommendations offered in the study. In this action research project, I have combined different data collection and analysis methods, including the concepts of conversational framing, portfolio analysis, policy theory reconstruction, and longitudinal qualitative data analysis.

Specifically, the combination of methodologies implied drawing from different interpretative epistemological approaches. Interpretative research approaches stress openness, multiplicity, and heterogeneity, actively paying attention to how meanings are articulated in context and (re)created through action and interaction. Moreover, interpretative approaches operate on the assumption that meanings are never fully fixed, but contested and negotiated by actors located in different fields of meaning.

In order to uncover and make sense of the different meanings and assumptions held by actors at Oxfam Novib, recording conversations and keeping a journal were the primary vehicles for generating, recording, and analyzing data. Here, the outcomes of two and a half years of participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and conversations with practitioners at Oxfam Novib and beyond, were documented. This was supplemented with an extensive document and literature review, as well as iterative phases of analysis conducted together with practitioners.

In my research journal I recorded information related to:

Conversations and interviews: Notes about all the interviews that I conducted, as well as notes about the relevant conversations I had with everyone at Oxfam Novib and outside, became recorded in the journal. In cases in which I had my journal with me, I asked for permission to record the conversation and make notes. In the cases when I did not have my journal, I made notes in it as soon as I was able to. In the journal, I also recorded minutes of meetings with my supervisors and with members of the Private Sector Team. Here, I highlighted the agreements reached between different people, alternatives on ways to proceed, opinions about specific issues, and attitudes.

Observations: The journal also contains notes about my own observations about particular issues or events. In the case of specific meetings or interviews, I would make notes of my observations on the margins of the page. In the case of recording everyday interaction, I recorded my observations about aspects that were valuable or relevant for my research.

New knowledge and ideas: In the journal, I also recorded new ideas that emerged as I read something, I made summaries of relevant literature, tentative argumentation lines, notes about potential research methods or analytical perspectives, etc. With time, it became possible to identify when new knowledge, ideas, or research directions emerged. In this sense, it became clear how research questions emerged and what analytical alternatives had been considered to address them.

Feedback and suggestions: In my research journal there are also notes and passages about discussions that I had with my supervisors; presentations I gave to Oxfam Novib's Private Sector Team; at scientific conferences where I presented preliminary results of this project in Glasgow, Scotland (2011) and Wageningen, the Netherlands (2013); as well as notes from the lectures I gave to students in Maastricht, Utrecht, and Wageningen Universities. Particularly relevant in this regard are the different suggestions and feedback that I received from other people.

In terms of data analysis, interesting issues, conclusions, or episodes of learning were identified through an intensive review and categorization of my notes. Here, key statements – views of the world, opinions, decisions, and ideas – were classified as such. The original notes, as well as the subsequent classification, became sources of data. Data was labeled or marked in different colors and dated, so that it could be sequenced. From this analysis it was possible to recognize and show the connection between my own action and learning, between action and the learning of others, and the connection between the two, by providing a full account of the way and context in which new research questions or analytical propositions emerged.

Although interviews are, by definition, interactive, my exchanges with members of the Private Sector Team became more relaxed and intimate as I became more a critical insider and a friendly outsider. On average, I sustained formal interviews with each member of the Private Sector Team at least twice per year, although I spoke with them much more frequently. From the interviews, I was able to obtain facts about Oxfam's private sector work in general and specific projects in particular, but also textual accounts of people's practices, their opinions, and views of a particular issue.

These intensive interviews took the form of directed conversations, rather than a question-answer-question format. Usually, I presented a set of propositions or scenarios as interview guide and let the conversation evolve more organically. The idea here was to engage practitioners in an on-going conversations in such a way that informants had plenty of freedom to respond and to converse in such way that alternate considerations could emerge. To this end, I relied on prompts, comments, or clarifications to invite participants to share the knowledge he/she had acquired from his/her own experience. In addition to these more-or-less formal conversations, conversations over lunch or coffee and in the corridor also provided input to my research journal.

Turning my notes into evidence required both creativity and rigor. I used the different notes, observations, and ideas that I had in my journal to create a full account of the research process, showing the interaction between experience and learning. For this, it was necessary to organize my notes at different points in time and to categorize them systematically, highlighting specific issues such as research questions, elements of Oxfam's theory of change, new ideas to explore, empirical evidence, people I should talk to, articles I should read, and so on.

The next challenge was to translate the notes and extracts into an interesting, coherent narrative. In this regard, translating data into evidence that would support the conclusions or recommendations advanced in each of the empirical parts of the study (Parts III to V), required

establishing specific criteria and standards, which are more thoroughly described in the next pages.

An important issue to mention here is that of confidentiality. While being at Oxfam Novib, I had full access to information in digital archives, email communication between the members of the Private Sector Team and with people outside the organization. While this proved to be extremely valuable in becoming acquainted with the organization and obtaining data to reconstruct events and conduct longitudinal analyses, it also meant that a large part of the information was confidential. Confidential not in the sense that no one should know, but more in the sense of it being work in progress. In this sense, many of the emails and reports consulted were confidential documents that recorded Oxfam Novib's current and past practices. These records showed information about what people thought or did at a specific point of time, and should thus be treated carefully.

Going further in detail, the next paragraphs detail the research strategy and methods used in the empirical parts of this research project.

PART III

Playing the Politics of Scale: Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

For the purpose of researching the articulation of rights-based principles in private sector interventions, this part of the study was designed as in-depth, longitudinal case study. Case studies serve to conduct extensive analysis of an individual unit that is exemplary of a particular phenomenon or situation. To this end, Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was selected together with practitioners due to Oxfam's committed involvement in the initiative as a member of the Executive Board and participant of various Working Groups.

To conduct this case study, I collected information from three different sources: RSPO documents available at the organization's website (see bibliographical references for more detail); Oxfam internal documents, email exchanges, and progress reports; and previous scientific research on the RSPO and the palm oil sector. From the analysis of these documents, it was possible to re-construct the historical intervention of Oxfam in the RSPO by means of elaborating a time line (see below) highlighting the most salient events.

This information was complemented with insights obtained during a field visit to several palm oil plantations in Indonesia, interviews with local community representatives, local environmental NGOs, and participation in the 2010 annual meeting of the RSPO. The pictures on page 181 were taken during our visit to communities in West Kalimantan, where we met with representative groups of smallholders, laborers, and women.

The information obtained from these different sources was coded and categorized in order to characterize Oxfam's involvement and identify key contributions from the perspective of human rights, i.e., creating new mechanisms through which local communities could have a better negotiating position vis-à-vis the private sector.

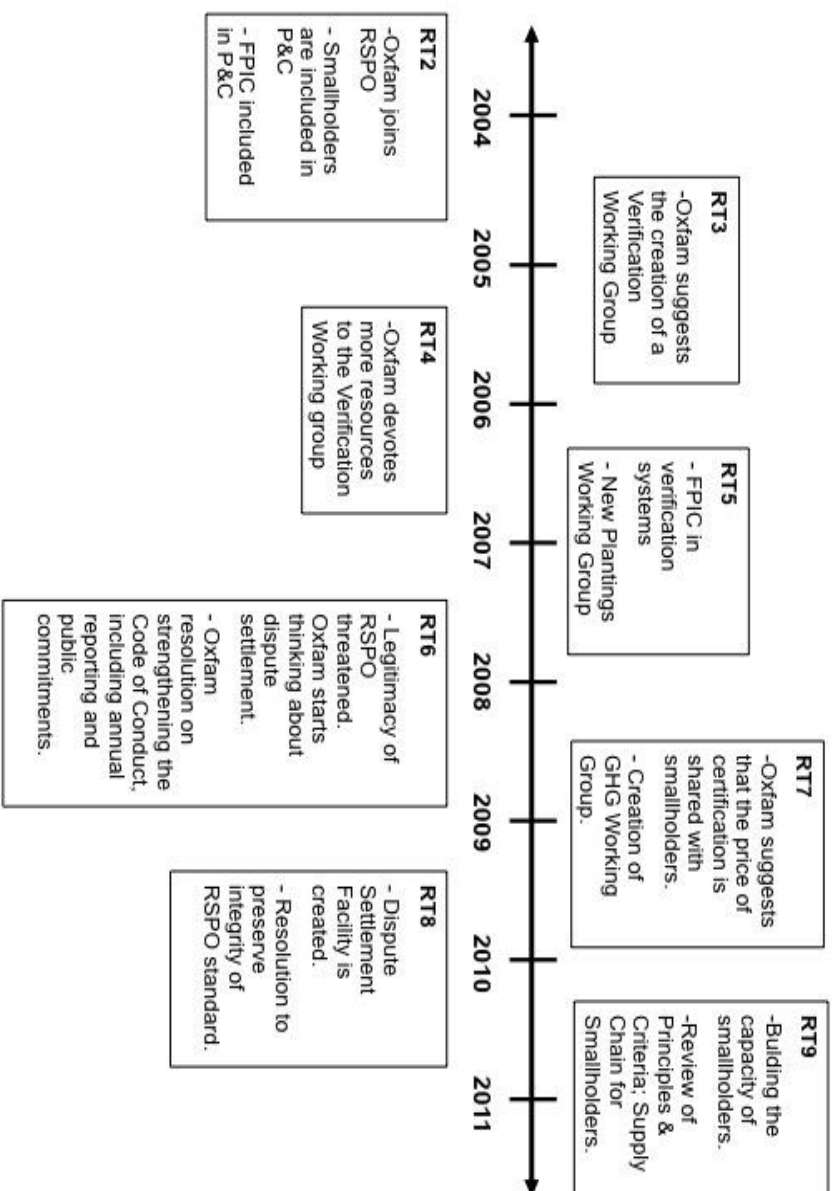


FIGURE 14: TIMELINE OF OXFAM'S INTERVENTION IN THE RSPO (2004-2011)



FIGURE 15: PICTURES FROM OUR MEETINGS WITH SMALLHOLDERS, LABORERS AND WOMEN

Additionally, interviews conducted with practitioners at Oxfam Novib were conducted on the basis of the following interview guide:

1. Oxfam Novib's work with the private sector: Origins, foundations, assumptions.
2. Oxfam Novib's strategies towards palm oil. How/why did it become a priority issue?
3. What were the priorities then and how have they evolved over the years?
4. What is Oxfam Novib's strategy behind its participation in the RSPO?
5. What barriers have been encountered?
6. Insider/outsider strategy and exit strategies: What is the outlook for the future?
7. How does Oxfam's work in the RSPO relate to advocacy and lobbying activities?
8. Has the combination of approaches (multi-stakeholder engagement+lobby+advocacy), strengthened/sustained/hindered/threatened the role of Oxfam Novib at the RSPO?
9. What elements of the rights-based approach can be identified in Oxfam Novib's work on palm oil?
10. What makes Oxfam's work different from that of other NGOs who do not take a rights-based approach?
11. When you think about your work on palm oil, what are the issues/factors that set the boundaries for action, what are your frames of reference? (e.g. the current Oxfam campaign, the aspects on which the private sector work is evaluated, the agendas of other organizations/donors, Oxfam Novib's private sector strategy, etc.).
12. How interaction with other Oxfam affiliates does affects/shape Oxfam Novib's work on palm oil?

The accounts and opinions of stakeholders in Indonesia and members of the Private Sector Team served to give texture to the history of the RSPO and Oxfam's involvement in it. From the realities described by these actors and the literature I had reviewed, I put forward an analytical framework based on the concept of the politics of scale, arguing that Oxfam's contributions in the RSPO occurred in terms of:

The creation of a space of engagement (ensuring that Oxfam's concerns become shared by other stakeholders), connecting spaces (forming alliances with others – insiders and outsiders – to realize Oxfam's goals), and spaces of interdependence (legitimizing and institutionalizing human rights principles in the standard). In order to illustrate the events and aspects that constitute each of these spaces, I elaborated thick descriptions from the data collected.

From this analysis and my own observations, I arrived to a number of conclusions and recommendations, which should be considered by Oxfam when engaging in the creation of sustainability standards through multi-stakeholder governance processes. In order to verify my findings, I shared preliminary versions of my analysis with practitioners at Oxfam Novib and made some modifications in order to refine the accuracy of my account and interpretation.

PART IV

Uncovering core competencies and critical issues: Oxfam's Private Sector intervention portfolio

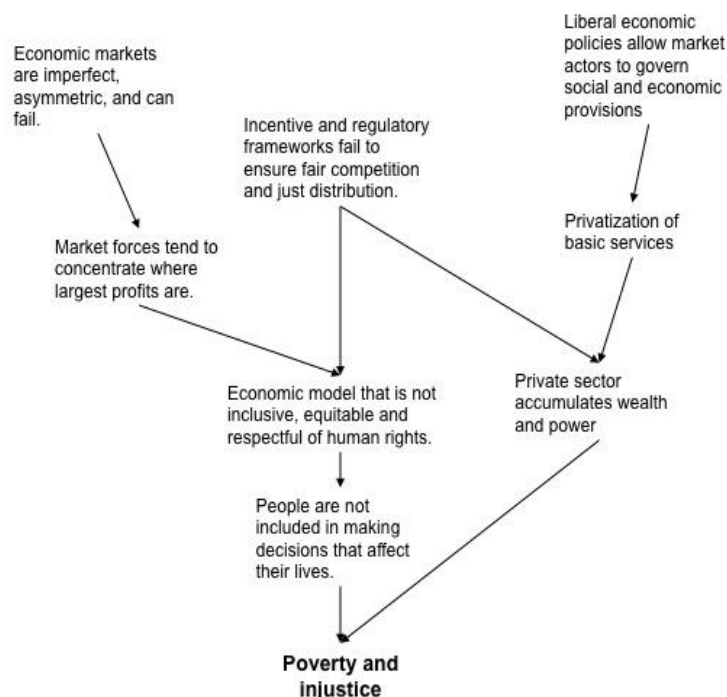
In order to further understand private sector engagement as a NGO intervention strategy, this part of the book was dedicated to capturing and analyzing a wide range of private sector interventions in an organized manner, as well as reconstructing their underlying theory of change. First, Oxfam's private sector theory of change was reconstructed using a policy analysis approach frequently used by policy scientists. For this purpose, five key (confidential) policy documents were analyzed:

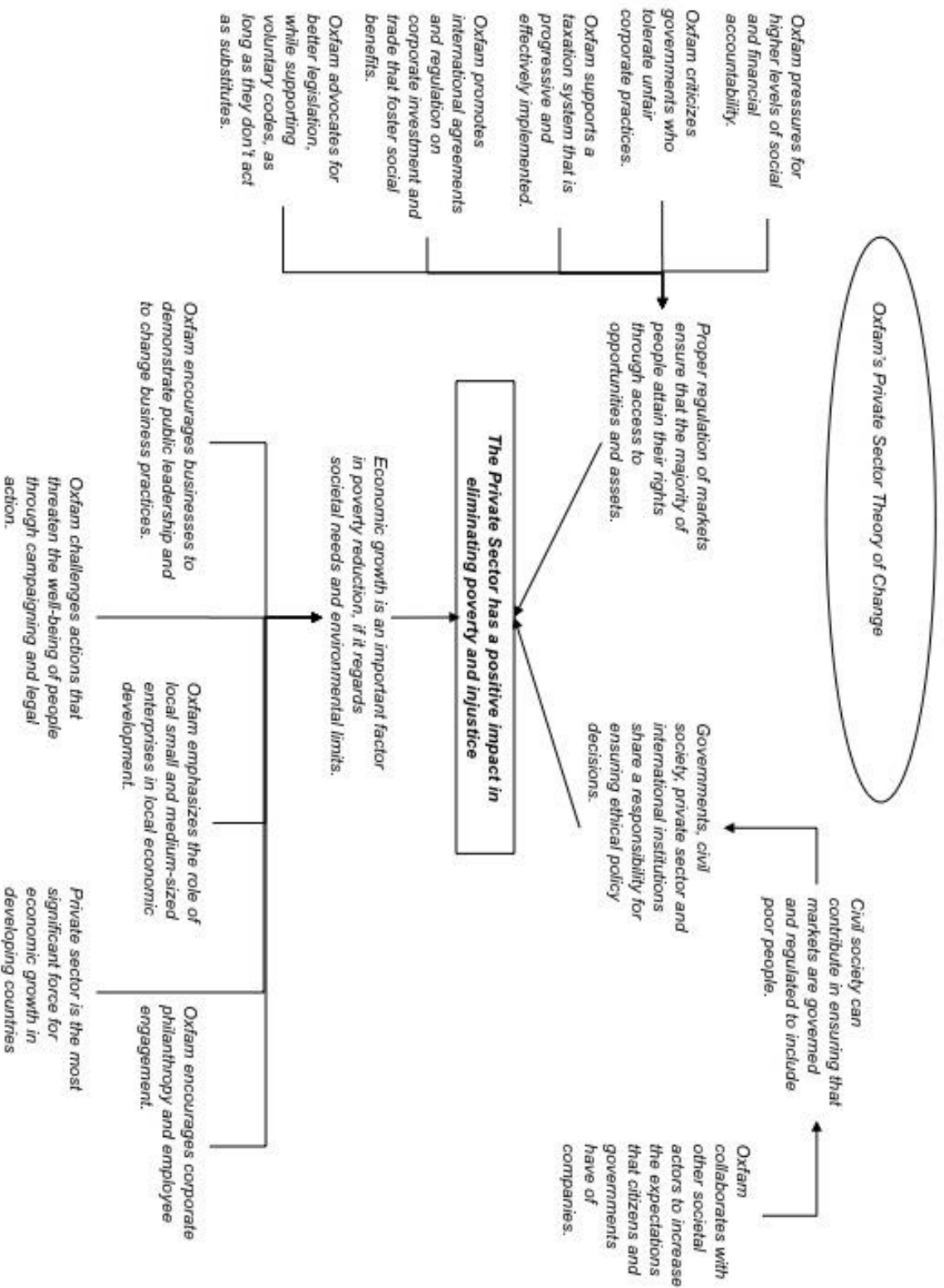
- Strategic framework for engaging multi-stakeholder initiatives, Oxfam Novib (2009).
- Actor strategy Private Sector, by Oxfam Novib (2003 and updated in 2010).
- Toolkit/Webdossier Private Sector Programme by Oxfam Novib (2011).
- Guidance and tools for Private Sector Work by Oxfam International (2013).
- Propositional Statement on the Private Sector, by Oxfam International (2014).

With the data collected through the policy analysis, I created a number of goal trees and diagrams that represented an overall picture of the structure and pattern of relationships between goals and means, causes and effects, norms and expected situations, which served to guide Oxfam's private sector engagement. These insights were complemented with information obtained from practitioners, either through interviews, informal conversation, and meetings. The model displayed below was created from successive approximations that I refined with practitioners during a couple of Private Sector Team meetings.

Next, from the elements identified through the reconstruction of Oxfam's private sector theory of change, three core competencies were derived: a multi-faceted approach, a systemic perspective, a collaborative outlook.

Problem Definition





Second, in order to conform a portfolio of private sector interventions, I assembled a sample of representative cases. This sample was created using stratified random sampling, a method that allows for categorizing items in groups or strata according to particular criteria. My preliminary sample was discussed, verified, and complemented by the Private Sector Team, ultimately yielding a sample of 64 interventions. The criteria used to select these 64 interventions included: the intervention being designed explicitly as a private sector intervention (as opposed to a development intervention that had a private sector component, for instance), the availability of information, and the level of success as perceived by the Private Sector Team.

Additionally, strata were defined based on Oxfam's official types of intervention strategies: regulation, advocacy, partnerships, fundraising, and doing business. "Type of intervention strategy" was selected as the first criterion for the conformation of the intervention portfolio because it was a criterion already applied by Oxfam Novib to categorize private sector interventions. Once the sample had been conformed, I further elaborated the private sector portfolio using the criteria of action repertoire, level of intervention, intervention objectives, and preferred change mechanism – key issues identified in the reconstruction of theory of change.

To analyze the portfolio of interventions, I used portfolio analysis, a method for analyzing and managing a collection of projects or programs and which allows to evaluate, prioritize, and select projects in relation to the strategy of an organization. The portfolio was assessed from the perspective of Oxfam's private sector core competencies, derived from the reconstruction of the theory of change. This allowed for evaluating the extent to which current private sector interventions served to achieve Oxfam's strategic intentions.

Moreover, an analysis of the evolution of the private sector portfolio overtime was performed together with practitioners. In previous years, the Private Sector Team had documented the shifts in strategy during the years between 2003 and 2009. More recently, we identified the changes that had taken place between 2009 and 2012, which became documented in the following table.

2003	2009	2012
Triangle approach with specific actors and strategies towards the three actor categories or "corners"; government, private sector, and civil society	Dynamic multi-stakeholder approach, forming flexible alliances with different actors at different moments in time. Shift in dynamics (from one corner to the middle of the "triangle"). Oxfam as broker or intermediary. Also more differentiating within actors: frontrunners, followers, and blockers.	Changing dynamics in the sectoral "triangle": increasingly blurred limits between private sector and governments. As private and public interests mix, Oxfam forced to interact with governments, firms, and multi-lateral institutions at the same time. More emphasis on risk/opportunity assessments. Alliances with like-minded actors become more important in multi-stakeholder contexts.
Company focus: partnerships with individual companies, working one on one. Netherlands to local.	Chain/sector focus. Multi-stakeholder approach in sectoral initiatives, alliances, and sector frontrunners. E.g. IDH, Agriprofocus, Tropical Commodity Coalition, Access to Medicine Index,	Chain/sector focus. Multi-stakeholder approach. Better alignment of interventions with campaign goals (i.e., GROW) and thematic priorities (i.e., struggle for land and water, creation of

	Roundtables, CSR platforms (Dutch and international). Global-local-global.	fair markets and financial systems).
Dialogue and cooperation with companies. Fundraising.	Multi-faceted interventions: research, dialogue, joined projects, lobby, public campaigning, and fundraising.	Multi-faceted interventions, with more proactive instead of reactive responses. More nuanced approach to private sector, as donors and governments loose clout.
Focus on sector policies of commercial Dutch banks and micro-finance.	“Fair Bank Guide” functioning and broadened scope to private equity investments (land banking), pension funds, micro-insurance etc.	Fair Bank Guide approach extended to other countries (Brazil) and investment fields such as untransparent and controversial arms deals, but also to positive investments in sustainable energy and the garment sector.
Pragmatic focus: develop CSR with a company; show the potentials and benefits of CSR.	Back to our political profile (Rights-Based Approach) in OI and in the Netherlands. Pressure to demonstrate that CSR works.	Combination of political and pragmatic approach to retain political power and reputation, while remaining attractive for donors. Increased attention in monitoring, evaluation, and learning. Increasing capacity constrains demand that people focus on ‘quick wins’.
Pure Aim 1 (Sustainable livelihoods): Economic development.	Relations with all Aims, especially Aim 4 (right to be heard), but Aim 1 still leading. Efforts to turn private sector into cross-cutting component across Aims and thematic priorities.	Aim 1 and 4 still most relevant, but increased attention to role of private sector in rest of the Aims. Private sector is key actor in GROW campaign, both as target and ally, which demands more nuanced approach from Oxfam.
Oxfam’s strength mostly in roles as a watchdog and broker in primary phases of standard development. Activities usually include problem analysis, agenda-setting, and advocacy to support less powerful groups.	Development of other capacities: increased involvement in the implementation phase, such as with impact measurement. Strengthening focus and expertise on complex and rights-based issues: land rights, gender, labor, climate change, etc.	Diversification of roles played in multi-stakeholder initiatives and standard development: technical advisor, critical insider/outsider, and endorser. Focus on rights-based issues. Need for managing relationships both with critics and allies.
Other Oxfam affiliates very critical on Oxfam Novib: perceived as working too close to companies instead of focusing on governments.	Oxfam Novib leading debates with other affiliates who have more ‘traditional’ corporate relations, limited to fundraising and campaigning.	Better integration across affiliates on private sector work. Close cooperation with Oxfam America, Great Britain, Australia, Honk Kong for the creation of new advocacy tools: Poverty Footprints, Food Company Campaign, participation in MSIs.
2003	2009	2012

Lastly, from the data obtained from the analysis of the portfolio and its evolution overtime, I was able to derive a number of critical issues according to the criterion of balance put forward in portfolio literature. From this perspective, Oxfam needs to pay special attention to the loose creation of synergies between current interventions, the limitations brought by aiming to achieve political change through market-based mechanisms, the difficulty in communicating a consistent organizational identity and image, and the risks posed by having to manage a multiplicity of relationships.

PART V

Managing a multiple-table situation: Oxfam's interaction with proponents and opponents of shrimp aquaculture certification

This part of the book analyzed the dynamic interplay between NGOs that act as proponents and opponents of certification as a mechanism to make the farmed shrimp aquaculture sector more responsible or sustainable. Data for this study was collected from three different sources. First, relevant scientific literature and NGO reports; second, through ten in-depth interviews conducted with members of the Private Sector Team and other organizations active in the same organizational field; third, through the analysis of 2813 emails exchanged between the Oxfam and other NGOs between the periods of 2008 to 2013 in which the issue of shrimp farm certification was discussed.

All emails related to farmed shrimp certification were identified and categorized through a quick scan, from which 150 were selected for a full-fledged analysis given their content and relevance to the topic under scrutiny. These emails were selected because they contained important elements of NGO positioning on the issue of certification, showing the main points of agreement or disagreement between the different NGO groups. Emails that were discarded were either replies or follow-ups to discussions already identified, or dealt with very practical matters.

The contents of the selected emails were analyzed using two complementary research methods: conversational analysis, together with event sequencing and longitudinal qualitative data analysis. The latter served to capture the nature of social change through time, to identify the mechanisms and strategies used by the different groups, and the ways in which structural change might impact the social world. Here, time was not simply linked to a trend in data, but to how it became mediated through the subjective meanings, cultural practices, and identities of actors.

Moreover, conversational analysis helped me to identify issues of meaning and context in interaction in order to determine differences in issue framing between Oxfam and the other NGOs. From the 150 emails, I extracted and transcribed sequences of conversations to identify differences in issue framing presented in terms of disagreements, questions, or challenging statements. From this analysis, I generated a table containing excerpts from the different conversations recorded in the email exchanges between Oxfam, the critical NGOs, and members of the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues at particular points in time. In that table, different types of framing were categorized using different colors. The table presented at the end of this section shows an excerpt from the original table.

The events and quotes extracted from the event sequencing and longitudinal qualitative data analysis were then used to recreate the events using thick descriptions to illustrate the main points of agreement and disagreement between the different NGO groups. This narrative was presented in three different type spans, defined in accordance to the strategic choices made by Oxfam during the interaction, namely:

- The decision to participate in the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues, taking an intermediary role between the arrangement and the critical NGOs.
- The decision to develop an intervention strategy based on insider/outsider coordination with the critical NGOs to influence the process.
- The decision of how to manage the relationship with the critical NGOs, once the coordinated strategy failed, resulting in deadlock.

After that, I scrutinized iteratively the different sequences and was able to identify that the main contentions between Oxfam and the other NGOs were about their view on what constituted an ideal farmed shrimp sector, the mechanisms that could trigger a specific type of change, and the strategies that could be employed to bring about such change. Cross-referencing the evidence provided by the data with the literature on conversational framing, I was able to define three attributes of framing as enacted by the different NGO groups: ontological framing, normative framing, and strategic framing.

These three different attributes of framing were discussed in terms of the main framing differences held by the different NGO groups using the data that was collected during the email analysis. As conclusion, this part of the book offers a reflection on the need for NGOs like Oxfam to secure their independence while keeping their interdependence. This reflection was generated through a series of conversations with practitioners about the implications posed by the interaction between Oxfam and other NGOs in the context of private sector engagement and certification.

The evidence of the data collected and the methods and techniques used to analyze it, accounts for the internal validity of this research project. The eclectic nature of the theoretical approaches and methods used in this project, show that there is no one particular methodology to answer a research question. In reality, the choice of methods and theories will follow the epistemological stance of the researcher and the nature of the research question.

In action research, researcher and practitioners usually experiment with different methods, emphasizing the value of possibility and letting the research process evolve. In fact, in action research, practitioners grant external validity, as they recognize the contribution of the inquiry to solving problems related to their practice. With this project, I hope to have influenced the learning process of practitioners at Oxfam Novib, making them more aware of the strengths and limitation of their views, approaches, strategies, and interventions.

DATE	OXFAM	CRITICAL OUTSIDERS	Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues
12 Feb 2010	<p>FPP and MAP network submit proposal asking Oxfam to fund a meeting between ‘critical outsider’ and ‘critical insider’ NGOs. According to Oxfam, “the MAP network is a loosely connected network of around 70 NGOs from all over the world. Together these NGOs have a strong track-record in making the world aware on social and environmental issues related to shrimp aquaculture. However, as a loosely connected network these NGOs do not have a solid network identity that would allow them to structure their work on shrimp and schedule meetings on a regular multi-year program budget”.</p> <p>The strategic interest for Oxfam in this meeting is three-fold: 1) it is beneficial for Oxfam to support NGOs that are vocal about the negative impacts of aquaculture. It helps to pave the way for Oxfam’s approach and prevents it from getting co-opted. 2) It helps Oxfam to manage brand risks and avoid being criticized by other NGOs that are not informed about Oxfam’s strategy. This allows also to play a good cop/bad cop strategy. 3) COs decide how to research and advocate their vision and provide critical insiders with new information to strengthen lobby capacity.</p>		
25 Feb 2010	<p>Oxfam is overly critic of one question in a list of 45 posed to the SHAD Steering Committee. The COs are not happy with Oxfam’s reaction and felt threatened.</p> <p>(Question 7, in the interest of transparency, where does the funding come from which enables CDP to sit and spend time on the Steering Committee?):</p>	<p>One CO responds: “...financial transparency within the certification process is felt by many critics to be an important issue regarding ongoing concerns about impartiality... This comment seems to be both threatening and unbalanced, and not the kind of response we would expect to hear from a vitally important stakeholder from</p>	<p>Communication after the meeting between the SHAD Steering Committee and COs, reports that the SC “found the meeting and subsequent discussions extremely useful, and we appreciate all of your questions and critique... The principal next step from the meeting is that COs</p>

	<p>"...then all of us...insiders AND outsiders, should show where we get the money from to argue with or against the industry..."</p>	<p>within the overall process, especially one who is in such a delicate and experienced position as Oxfam Novib is in this instance... I would suggest that this kind of threat does not exactly help build trust between yourself and the wider critical networks, who are already very concerned about your ongoing role within the SHAD process...".</p> <p>Another CO responds: "...the thin line of communications between our groups is rather delicate or fragile. Your recent reaction needs to be toned down if you wish to even continue on a path towards a truer discussion between all of us."</p>	<p>would develop a list of 10-12 critical questions/issues... This communication would be used as the basis for deciding on if further engagement would be useful and mutually beneficial". COs respond, posing 45 questions to the SHAD Steering Committee.</p>
<p>29 March 2010</p>		<p>Violations to the RAMSAR convention allow that wetlands are ruined by illicit developments. MAP needs to halt the 85-90% on the shrimp production that is destroying mangroves. This can be done by reducing consumption demand for imported shrimp in Europe and USA. SHAD certification promises that it will not certify farms that violate international conventions and thus will not benefit from the export market. WWF argues that there is value on having measurable standards, but COs state that they have found the SHAD standards to be quite vague and full of untenable generalities.</p>	

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ANNEX A – Cocoa Background Paper

COCOA BACKGROUND PAPER

OXFAM NOVIB

Authors: Luli Pesqueira & Frank Michielsen

September 2010

Introduction

Oxfam Novib believes that the private sector, if operating responsibly, can be a force for change and contribute to poverty alleviation and equitable economic development through its roles as employer, buyer, and corporate citizen. In some cases, businesses often have more power than a majority of poor nations and use their position to the detriment of people living in poverty. Nevertheless, a variety of motives ranging from reputation risk management to business opportunities for proactive sustainability management in sourcing, are motivating companies to engage in more responsible practices. Oxfam Novib works to build a robust business case for sustainability and to get corporate actors to change their practices.

Oxfam Novib takes a value chain approach to ensure sustained improvements at all levels in the agricultural sector and to foster pioneer work from companies who are willing to improve their social standards and to bring forward rights based issues. For this purpose, Oxfam Novib participates in the development of mainstream standards and certification initiatives such as round tables, which aim to level the playing field and create new rules at the sector level, often in a multi stakeholder setting. These initiatives are a partial response to the existing governance gap in global sustainability issues and are believed to be the best alternative so far, even when their stringency and democratic credentials are questioned.

With regards to the agribusiness sector, Oxfam Novib is especially concerned with the way in which businesses have taken over the global governance of food systems, excluding less powerful players from determining how and what gets produced, as well as depriving smallholder producers from accessing global markets and having control over their own natural resources.

In this context, Oxfam Novib has placed particular interest on the global cocoa sector because of the potential it offers to improve the livelihoods of millions of small-scale producers around the world. In 2003, Oxfam Novib prioritized cocoa as a sector with high development potential and has since then been involved in building and strengthening sustainable cocoa networks between producers, processors, importers, exporters, and other sustainability actors.

This paper outlines Oxfam Novib's position with regards to the sustainability of the global cocoa sector for the coming years. This position is grounded in four main areas of work: transparent markets, responsible companies, satisfied consumers, and empowered cocoa farmers. Before looking in detail into each of these areas, the following sections introduce the global cocoa sector and its sustainability challenges, followed by Oxfam Novib's approach and expertise.

Sustainability in the cocoa sector: challenges and trends

Cocoa plays a crucial role in the livelihoods of approximately 14 million of people around the world. Cocoa production is a labor intensive process which is being increasingly challenged by stagnant technology, low yields, and the aging of farmers and trees. Farmers have been forced to reduce costs to participate in the international commodity market and to hire cheap and unskilled labor in order to cope with low, fluctuating prices in the international cocoa market. The cocoa industry, on the other hand, has become highly integrated and efficient. Most cocoa is exported from West Africa, with Ghana and Ivory Coast accounting for 60% of total global production, and imported in to Europe and the United States, where most cocoa beans are grinded to produce cocoa liquor, powder, and butter.

Most smallholders and cocoa workers live below the poverty line and have little bargaining power because of inefficient producer-market linkages and limited access to financial and capacity services. The low quality of the cocoa beans and crop loss due to pests and diseases pose great challenges to famers' livelihoods and security of supply to global markets. Additionally, inefficient farming techniques have devastating environmental consequences including the use of pesticides, deforestation, and soil degradation. This situation has lead cocoa smallholders and workers into a circle of unsustainable production and poverty, in which they face complex sustainability challenges related to:

Labor

Most system changes are required in the production end of the chain, where smallholders represent 95% of the cocoa produced worldwide. Cocoa farmers around the world are ageing and spend less time in crop management; for instance, 38% of the farmers in Ivory Coast are older than 50 years old. This situation has brought a yield decrease and increased pressure on the younger generation to take over cocoa production. Expectations of farmers and their communities, however, suggest that cocoa farming will not be economically viable for the next generations since income from cocoa farming alone is not sufficient to keep cocoa farming households out of poverty.

A situation of poverty and vulnerability has pushed farmers to hiring cheap labor, sometimes from neighboring countries, under poor conditions. Children have been found working in cocoa farms in Africa, sometimes in the company of their parents and others under cases of suspected child trafficking. Additionally, people working in farms suffer from exposure to pesticides, unsafe working conditions, and low and unstable income. The younger generation of farmers refuses to work under the same conditions as their parents and is abandoning the plantations to pursue a life in the city. Women also face a vulnerable position in the cocoa sector as they perform hard labor and gain limited economic power and access to land, education, and infrastructure.

Land

Cocoa grows in complex and unequal systems of landownership with varying land productivity across countries, which prevents the application of one-fits-all solutions. It is estimated that 90% of total cocoa production in Africa takes place in small farms of an average size of 3 hectares, while in Asia cocoa is usually grown both in larger private states or plantations and small farms. Cocoa farms in Latin America are medium-sized with exception of Brazil, where they tend to be larger, and are often agro-forestry systems that combine cocoa with planted fruit and timber species. Access to land and farm expansion in West Africa is uncertain due to the informal traditional ownership system, which also regulates the social role and position of farmers. These traditional ownership and tenure systems do not include legal land ownership

and parcel delimitation regulations. The fact that that only few farmers have land titles prevents farmers to access land and credit and discourages farmers from making investments on a land that is not officially theirs. Finally, most cocoa farmers have limited access to basic social amenities and sometimes lack basic infrastructure facilities like roads, drinking water, transport, and education.

Environment & Biodiversity

Compared to other agricultural systems, cocoa can play a positive role on the environment if it is grown in certain ways; otherwise, it can contribute to deforestation and biodiversity loss. Shade-grown cocoa agro-forestry systems that combine cocoa with other fruit and timber species are more beneficial than full-sun plantations in terms of protecting biodiversity and safeguarding ecosystem function. Cocoa agro-forests perform a wide range of ecological services like maintaining hydrological and soil function and providing habitat for pollinators and useful insects. If managed correctly, cocoa plantations can be used to partially reforest degraded agricultural lands, stabilizing and providing livelihoods within buffer zones around protected areas, and improving habitat connectivity for wildlife. The challenge is to line up the right incentives to support this kind of ecosystem and to properly implement and maintain them.

Climate

Cocoa farms can help protect habitats for wildlife during unusual climate changes. The role of forests is made up by the combined effect of the various species that make up the forest. Cocoa agro-forests can capture important amounts of carbon, preventing it from being released in the form of carbon dioxide. The destruction and degradation of forests caused by logging activities and conversion into agricultural land cause that large quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are released into the atmosphere contributing to climate change.

Market

The global cocoa supply chain is characterized by an unequal power balance between cocoa farmers on one end, and cocoa grinders and manufacturers on the other end. The production side of the chain is threatened by increasing supply insecurity as individual farmers are in need for training and support, while the other end of the chain displays a high concentration of power within a few companies. This imbalance is expected to increase as the cocoa infrastructure in the main African producing countries continues to deteriorate.

This situation is further worsened by the unpredictability of the cocoa market which can be significantly dramatically influenced by the actions of one single company. Price increases in the world market affect the profit margins of almost the whole sector, as traders, processors, and manufacturers have to buy cocoa at an artificially high price and farmers hardly ever receive any additional compensation.

Through mergers and acquisitions, the cocoa sector has become highly concentrated and dominated by a few dominant players who have access to resources. On the contrary, farmers often have a hard time accessing formal financial service facilities due to the lack of proximity and adequate lending structures, which pushes them to rely on informal lenders or cocoa dealers that act as capital providers. Farmers need adequate credit facilities and rural banking infrastructure for purchasing inputs, supporting their households, and buying land.

Institutional/political

The institutional and political environment of some cocoa producing countries have slowed or even prevented progress in the cocoa sector. In Africa and Indonesia, farmers have very limited access to market information and market prices which leaves them in a disadvantaged position with respect to cocoa buyers. The lack of information, along with political instability of some producing countries, poses a direct threat on global cocoa production and its institutions. Farmers, for example, are often not organized and represented in cooperatives, which decreases farmers' negotiating position in the chain. Producers associations have the potential to facilitate learning and access to inputs and credit; nevertheless, few farmers are members of a cooperative.

Oxfam Novib has been working since 2003 to overcome the sustainability challenges of the cocoa sector and has since then engaged with various actors along the chain with the objective of improving sourcing and production practices. Some of these include:

- Smallholders/ farmers: Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria, Brazil, Peru.
- Traders: such as Ecom, OLAM, Armajaro.
- Grinders/ processors: ADM, Cargill, Barry Callebaut
- Manufacturers: Mars, Nestlé, Hershey, Kraft Foods, Ferrero, Barry Callebaut
- Retail: Wal-Mart (USA), Carrefour (France), Ahold, C1000, Jumbo, Plus (Netherlands), Metro (Germany), Tesco, Sainsbury (UK),
- Consumers: Europe (Germany, UK, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium); United States; Japan; and growing markets (Russia, China, Latin America).

Oxfam Novib's approach

Empowering citizens to exercise their human rights

For Oxfam Novib, the realization of the basic rights and basic freedoms are part and parcel of every development process and the aim for poverty eradication. For this reason, Oxfam Novib takes a rights-based approach (RBA) to development, which provides a framework to describe development in terms of society's obligations to respond to the basic entitlements and rights of individuals.

In Oxfam Novib's rights-based approach, the right to a sustainable livelihood, social and political participation, and gender and empowerment is central. We focus on people not as beneficiaries but as owners of rights. We strengthen their capacities and access to resources in order to make informed choices, to improve their situation, and to defend their rights. The majority of people in poor countries earn their incomes from the market sector as small-scale entrepreneurs or workers in small and large enterprises or multinationals. To ensure security of employment and income for people, businesses must incorporate profitability, ecological sustainability, and social responsibility into their corporate processes.

Oxfam's rights-based approach provides process requirements for countervailing powers to be heard in the context of economic decision-making locally, nationally, and globally. We believe that the inclusivity of otherwise disenfranchised groups should be ensured in any decision-making process that affects their livelihoods, for they have the power to know best what is beneficial for them. Overcoming poverty by strengthening the livelihoods of men and women living through agriculture has long been central to Oxfam Novib's work. Our work on ensuring the right to a sustainable livelihood focuses mainly on two objectives: achieving food and income security and securing decent employment conditions. Men and women need sufficient food and income to provide for their families and participate in various aspects of

social and economic life, as well as decent wages and working conditions to have access to and influence in markets and improve their welfare.

Striving for equity and justice in the world's food system

Oxfam Novib is concerned about the 2.5 billion people in developing countries whose food and livelihood security depend on agriculture and about the failure of political institutions to provide an enabling environment to ensure the right to food. Oxfam Novib is convinced that agriculture plays a key role as a viable livelihood option and that the fair and sustainable use of resources in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries is crucial for food security, economic stability, and poverty reduction. The use and extraction of natural resources needs to be based on sound and responsible resource management, while more fair and sustainable production conditions are ensured at the small and larger scale.

Since resources like land, water and carbon are increasingly scarce; they become both a risk and an opportunity for the private sector: a risk of reduced access to and/or raising cost of raw materials; and an opportunity of increased profit for companies which control these scarce resources. Companies are often able to influence policies in their favor, and in any case are better placed to quickly capture the gains of policies and investments than smallholders. At the very basic, the struggle for land, water and carbon is an equity dilemma that demands choosing constrained natural resources for export production on the one side, or for directly supporting the livelihoods of communities on the other.

Improving the social and environmental performance of global value chains

Oxfam Novib takes a value chain approach to address the social and environmental concerns and offer innovative and economically viable opportunities for growers, workers, consumers, policy-makers and the many other actors along an entire product chain. Taking a value chain approach means addressing all the stages of a product's production, trade, and consumption. On one end of the chain, Oxfam Novib works to better equip farmers with limited assets to benefit from global markets, while on the other end it works with large multinational companies to ensure the uptake of more sustainable sourcing and production practices. Value chain development is a useful approach for targeting particular players with potential.

Oxfam Novib classifies cocoa as an important crop given its potential to improve the livelihood of small-scale producers in the cocoa sector and its potential positive impact on biodiversity. The main challenges to small-scale cocoa production are to achieve sound resource management, increase productivity of both land and labor, diversify production, add value through better quality and improved processing, address social issues (child labour, gender inequity), retain a greater share of the final value of products through improved marketing, and achieve environmental sustainability.

Setting sustainability criteria through certification

In the year 2000, consumers and activists raised concern about the use of child labor and poor working conditions in cocoa production. These claims, along with serious threats to global supply, pushed the industry to take a more active and holistic approach to sustainable cocoa production. Since then, several traceability and certification schemes have emerged, along with other multi-stakeholder initiatives to promote better practices in the sector and to increase coordination between the different stakeholders.

The use of consumer labels and certification is now regarded as a good business practice. Following this trend, brands like Verkade, Mars, Cadbury & Kraft, and Hershey's among others

have decided to have a percentage of their production certified by one of the existing schemes: Fairtrade, Organic, Rainforest Alliance, and UTZ Certified. These certification programs emerged as a response to growing business and consumer concern about food production methods and their impact on the poor and the environment. By the end of 2009, 3% of the global cocoa market had been certified.

Oxfam Novib believes that the development of criteria on social, economic and environmental sustainability is a good starting point to ensure better living and working conditions for cocoa farmers. Oxfam Novib has participated in the development of certain codes of conduct that require suppliers to meet standards on food safety, working conditions, and environmental impacts of production practices. The process of certification provides farmers with training, access to new markets, and enhanced efficiency and revenues, which can directly improve the conditions of cocoa farms.

All production standards – Fairtrade, Organic, Rainforest Alliance, and UTZ Certified – have seen an increasing demand for certified cocoa in the last couple of years and expect to receive even greater commitments from popular cocoa grinders and chocolate manufacturers like Cargill, Kraft/Cadbury, Mars and Nestlé.

Oxfam Novib's capacity and expertise

Through its corporate and government advocacy activities, the expertise of Oxfam Novib on the impacts of business on smallholders, as well as on their communities and the environment, has become quite sophisticated. In the past decade, Oxfam Novib has gained experience in the development of interventions focused on value chains for mainstream markets. Through our work on coffee, tea, shrimps, palm oil, soy, and cotton we have acquired a wealth of experience and a unique position to play an active role in restructuring agriculture so that poor men and women farmers can benefit from effective food production and serve as stewards of their natural resources. Oxfam Novib has also been actively helping corporate actors to shape their business case and develop pro-poor business models that contribute to sustainable livelihoods.

Oxfam Novib has made great contributions to the challenge of linking trade and development issues by commercializing specialty products that offer access to new markets; achieving changes in policies and practices at national and international levels; relocating of land; and shedding light on the issue of competition between food and energy crops which threaten biodiversity and the livelihoods of millions of poor people.

Furthermore, Oxfam Novib has the capacity and expertise to play an active role in three different levels: at the national and European level, at the international level, and the production level. With respect to the first, Oxfam Novib plays a direct role in influencing Dutch and European markets and policy by providing advice to relevant actors, gathering and sharing information, and pressuring for more just systems.

At the international level, the Oxfam International confederation has built up close cooperation with organizations and partners who advocate for change in value chains and the global trade system, often collaborating with multi-lateral organizations and networks to create improved production systems, often engaging in multi-stakeholder initiatives, roundtables, or partnerships¹. At the production level, Oxfam Novib works to increase the capacity of local partners so that they can take up a more active role in developing countries.

¹ Oxfam Novib is representing Oxfam in Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), Round Table on Cacao (RSCE), Common Code for the Coffee Community (4C), and as Oxfam Novib is member of the Steering Committee of Utz Good Inside Cocoa Program, supported by the Dutch Initiative for Sustainable Trade (IDH)

To achieve sustained improvements in the lives of women and men involved in small scale farming and in precarious jobs in the agricultural sector and protect the rights of community members affected by international value chains, Oxfam Novib implements simultaneously strategies in four action areas, targeting the private sector; governments; smallholders, workers, and communities; and civil society.

1. Corporate Advocacy

Targeting companies with large market shares through (a) combined pressure from consumers, investors, farmers in the supply chain and workers, (b) sector wide proposals (Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives), and (c) further progress made by 'front-runners' in the development of sustainability standards for mainstream markets.

Case – Collaboration with frontrunners

Verkade (2008): the Dutch-based company Koninklijke Verkade became the first company in the Netherlands to produce all its chocolate from Fairtrade cocoa. Oxfam Novib and Max Havelaar collaborated with Verkade to realize this step. The transformation of Verkade set an example and positively impacted the whole cocoa sector in the Netherlands.

Tony (2009): Oxfam Novib funded research for a Tony's Chocolonely pilot project to set up an alternative model supply chain for West African cocoa that aimed at improving farmer incomes and reducing the occurrence of extremely poor labor situations, in particular child labor. The innovative proposal is to replace the principle of segregated processing for the organizational development mechanism (ODM) that results in efficiency gains within the Fair Trade model. The final result will be to create sustainable "bankable" cooperatives.

Case – Participation in multi-stakeholder initiatives

Roundtable for a Sustainable Cocoa Economy (2007-2009): The RSCE brings together all significant stakeholders in the cocoa supply chain, including the governments of cocoa producing and consuming countries, and is intended to serve as a forum for a participatory and comprehensive towards a sustainable cocoa economy. Key elements for sustainable cocoa economy have been discussed and agreed upon. Oxfam Novib believes the RSCE can prevent fragmentation of initiatives and financial efforts and enable the exchange of various partners' experiences.

UTZ 'Good Inside' cocoa program (2009): This certification program coordinated by Solidaridad is built on partnership with companies such as Cargill, Mars, Nestlé, and others. The certification program is industry driven and aims to increase cocoa quality, as well as the social and environmental production standards. Oxfam Novib provides a 'critical voice' and a space to ensure that they voice of the marginalized is heard at all stages of the process.

2. Government Advocacy

Building broad alliances, lobby capacity and policy development to promote stronger or innovative agricultural and labor policy, extension services for small farmers and access to credit in order to address international trade rules and to promote responsible public procurement.

Case – Alliance building

In 2008, Oxfam Novib actively supported and funded the transition of the Dutch Coffee

Coalition into the Tropical Commodity Coalition (TCC). By 2010, the TCC has: (1) brought together and strengthened the voice of southern NGOs and farmer organizations in multi-stakeholder and business initiatives; (2) carried out critical studies of the situation in the sector and published barometers and other kind of documents to emphasize public sustainability commitments made by companies and increase transparency along the chain; (3) effective lobbying with companies and governments at the national and European level to reward frontrunners and shame laggards; and (4) coordination with Dutch government to put pressure on producer governments via international commodity bodies like ICCO and increase the success of their own programs.

Case – Broader commitment in the Netherlands

After effective campaigning and lobbying in 2009, Oxfam Novib took advantage of the political momentum that had been created which led to a more encompassing agreement in the Netherlands to make the whole sector more sustainable. On 4th March 2010, a Declaration of Intent was signed by representatives of the government, retail, chocolate manufacturing brands, certification bodies, and NGOs including Oxfam Novib in which they publicly committed to making the whole cocoa sector in the Netherlands 100% sustainable by 2025. In 2015, 50% of the cocoa will be sustainable. In this declaration, parties agreed to strive for a more transparent supply chain, more cooperation between standard bodies, and full compliance with international frameworks such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) standards and OECD guidelines on CSR.

3. Organized Action

Supporting (new forms of) organized small holders and informal workers, women's leadership development, solidarity actions, alliance building (also between regions and between South and North) and linking and learning.

Case – Partner support and certification

Since 2003, Oxfam Novib supports partners working with sustainable cocoa in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In early 2009, our partner Uirevi (l'Union Inter Régionales Victoire) in Ivory Coast was certified by the Max Havelaar label. In 2010 already 20 cooperatives were certified. They sold 7000 ton of Fairtrade cocoa. In total 11,000 cocoa producers comply with the Fair Trade standard and have access to the benefits of receiving a fair price for their product. The experience gained by these cooperatives can be now expanded to benefit all 38 cooperatives, representing 13,000 members and 75,000 tons of cocoa. Konan Toussaint Nguessan, Director of Uirevi, indicates that the role of Oxfam International was crucial to obtain the financial and information sources needed to obtain the Fair Trade certification.

4. Popular Campaigning and Communications

Developing and implementing communication strategies to challenge myths and change beliefs. Influencing media and decision makers with media/consumer campaigns.

Case – Groene Sint campaign

Over the last few years, Oxfam Novib has been consistently campaigning in the Netherlands for a more sustainable and fair production, trade and consumption of cocoa and chocolate. Our main campaigning tool has been the Green Santa Claus, a well-known celebrity, who has been urging Dutch chocolate buyers, supermarkets and chocolate manufacturers to increase the market share of responsibly produced chocolate. At the end of 2009, the Green Santa Claus was extremely active and successful; he was able to mobilize 100.000 chocolate

activists through the internet and make appearances in the media and the Dutch Parliament. Almost all supermarkets declared that they would put chocolate from sustainable cocoa on their shelves in the near future.

Outlook: Improving the situation of cocoa smallholders in collaboration with other stakeholders

Oxfam Novib visualizes for the coming years a greater contribution to the development of thriving cocoa communities and the implementation of improved sustainability criteria throughout the global cocoa supply chain. For this purpose, Oxfam Novib will work on four complementary objectives: empowerment of farmers, responsible companies, transparent markets, and satisfied consumers.

1. Empowerment of farmers

In 2001, the cocoa industry faced the prospect of a substantial decline in global stocks which forced market operators to acknowledge that the global cocoa economy had entered a phase of structural deficit. Years of low and falling prices had reduced farmers' incomes and had forced them to reduce inputs into cocoa production. This brought lower yields and great losses caused by the spread of pest and diseases such as Black Pod, Witches' Broom, and Cocoa Pod Borer.

Cocoa farming is extremely labor intensive and can only be grown by small producers with the adequate skills and inputs to properly manage their farms. Smallholders are usually price takers that have little influence on the cocoa market; this makes their revenues unreliable and prevents them from making new farm investments. In recent years, the decline in international cocoa prices has worsened this condition and farmers have not been able to make a decent living of cocoa.

Oxfam Novib continues to work with its partners to strengthen farmers' capacity. Most of this work is done by providing technical skills and addressing organizational and marketing constraints by providing training in production methods and post-harvest handling, as well as building organizational capacity within farmer organizations. For this purpose, Oxfam Novib funds local NGOs, community-based organizations, microfinance institutions, producer organizations, network organizations and social movements fighting for change. In the last years, Oxfam Novib has funded organizations that provide agricultural extension services, rural financial services, vocational or entrepreneurial training, lobbying for policy changes, and linking small farmers to markets. Some of the work of our partners involves preventing the creation of new poverty.

In this area, one of our main activities is to help farmers organize themselves in cooperatives or producer organizations through which they can better exercise their bargaining power, capitalize their earnings, and obtain more investment. Also, Oxfam Novib works to improve the position of women and represent their interests in such organizations, as well as before policy makers and planners, and to empower them via diversified income strategies.

2. Responsible companies

In collaboration with the private sector, Oxfam Novib works with companies to improve the livelihoods of people by integrating development and poverty reduction as part of their core business through employment generation, market innovations, and supply management. Oxfam Novib takes a collaborative approach and helps companies to become more aware of

their effects on poverty, as well as the social and environmental impacts of its sourcing and production practices.

Oxfam Novib combines strategies towards the private sector, which can combine cooperation and campaigning. On occasions, Oxfam Novib will work hand in hand with the cocoa industry to improve its practices and develop collaborative partnerships, and in other occasions it will voice criticisms to pressure laggards into changing their behavior.

This two pronged approach, however, is backed up by an internal code of conduct that guides Oxfam Novib's engagement with the private sector, while promoting transparency and congruence. In working with the private sector, Oxfam Novib and its partners aim for poverty reduction through employment creation, market access, credits extension, and other economic or financial tools. Yet, they also encourage businesses to go beyond their direct level of influence by also promoting good governance, rule of law, equal treatment of men and women, education and training, and social organization.

Oxfam Novib can help companies look into their 'poverty footprint' by analyzing their practices with regards to different sustainability issues in the countries where they have operations. These include not only companies based Europe and the United States, but also powerful corporate actors from emerging economies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In the globalized economy, supply chains connect companies with countries and communities across the world, making compliance with environmental and labor regulation and international CSR frameworks increasingly challenging. Oxfam Novib's expertise on issues on social rights and responsibilities provide the private sector with clear guidance of how to be accountable towards the communities and the resources they affect.

Through engagement with frontrunner companies, partnerships, and multi-stakeholder initiatives, Oxfam Novib works with a multiple stakeholders to develop and improve regulatory mechanisms for common goods, ranging from formal legislation to private self-regulation. These mechanisms fill governance failures or gaps and promote inclusive, participatory, empowering, and accountable ways of reaching more legitimate and better structural solutions to sector-wide challenges. In this respect, Oxfam Novib's work with standard setting initiatives such as UTZ Certified and the Roundtable for a Sustainable Cocoa Economy (RSCE) is relevant. The main role of Oxfam Novib in these initiatives is to ensure (Southern) civil society and farmer participation in these multi-stakeholder settings and to influence major industry players and governments.

In its work with the private sector, Oxfam Novib strives for companies to comply with national and international legislation; set realistic ambitious goals for purchasing sustainable cocoa, while communicating their choice to consumers; take additional initiatives to improve the situation of cocoa farmers; create transparency along their supply chain. Oxfam Novib is engaged with international companies in the whole cocoa chain; cocoa traders, processors, manufacturers and retail.

3. Transparent markets

Market transparency is beneficial not only for cocoa farmers but for the whole cocoa industry. Farmers working in recently liberalized markets in many African countries have a great need for information that can help them make decisions. Farmers are often disadvantaged with respect to access to market information with respect to their counterparts. Price information is necessary for making prospects over current sales price, intra-seasonal price prospects for planning, and long-term prospects for making new investments in cocoa production. Access to market information allows farmers to be aware of market opportunities that can help enhance

their revenue from cocoa production, as well as provide them with better access to financial and insurance instruments that protect them against uncertainty.

At the other end of the chain, the cocoa processors and chocolate manufacturers need reliable price information to cover the cost of inputs and cocoa storage. Marketing information on cocoa production and consumption trends is needed by chocolate companies to make long-term investments in chocolate production, as well as research and development for new products. Market transparency also helps to assure that the final consumer obtains a cocoa product that is reasonably priced and provides him with sufficient information on the quality and ingredients of the product.

Additionally, large investments in the cocoa sector are more likely to occur if investors have updated and reliable information to base their decisions upon. In the areas of banking and insurance, for instance, the variations in the international value of the domestic currency, as well as specific local market structures and conditions including taxation and competition have a significant impact on cocoa gate prices. Gate price variations directly affect farmers, but also cocoa traders and investors.

In order to increase market transparency in the cocoa sector, Oxfam Novib works on two fronts; firstly, by creating transparency mechanisms thorough which companies can demonstrate to governments, consumers, and other stakeholders how they can influence the protection of human rights and the environment. Oxfam lobbies both for obligatory mechanisms (via EU, governments) and voluntary mechanisms (via ICCO), as well as for reporting on supplier selection and purchasing processes. And secondly, by revising the London International Financial Futures and Options Exchange to ensure that it is subject to independent monitoring and external control.

4. Satisfied consumers

Taking a value chain approach, Oxfam Novib addresses not only the producer end, but also the consumer end of the chain. Consumers can use their purchasing choices to express political and social values and to push for social change. Oxfam Novib influences the purchasing behavior of consumers by initializing campaigns to raise awareness about good or bad practices related to a specific brand of product. Since only a limited group of consumers act upon their values, Oxfam Novib also influences supermarkets to set the example and provide 100% sustainable products.

Consumers are paying more and more attention to the social and environmental impacts of the products they buy. The role of Oxfam Novib is to support consumer organizations in setting agendas, building support for multilateral solutions, and putting pressure on governments to implement them. Oxfam Novib also mobilizes consumer pressure on companies to improve their sourcing or production practices and to create new markets for certified sustainable products. While, this role has become common in Western markets, the new challenge lies with mobilizing consumers in Southern countries.

Our dream

Oxfam Novib visualizes a cocoa sector in which smallholder farmers are self-confident in their own abilities and empowered to demand their rights. They increase their productivity through new investments in better cocoa trees, agro-ecological techniques and diversification of production and income generation activities. Smallholder farmers increase the benefits they gain from their production by better processing and storing crops after harvest, managing sales, accessing markets, and adding value, for example by strengthening producer

organizations, the empowerment of women farmers and first level processing. Working with women and men farmers, research institutes stimulate innovation in smallholder agriculture regarding mitigation to climate change and spread the experience through farming communities. At the same time, national government policies are changed so that they stimulate smallholder farming, investments in much needed infrastructure is made and agricultural extension systems are reinvigorated and improved to respond to smallholders demands.

ANNEX B – Sample of Private Sector Interventions

No.	Partner	Country	Level	Intervention objective				Type of intervention				Oxfam's Role			Repertoire Approach
				Market	Technology	Rules	People	Regulation	Advocacy	Partnership	Fundraising	Funding	Capacity	Brokering	
1	ABM AMRO strategic partnership	Netherlands	Netherlands	✓			✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	Insider
2	Access to Medicine Index	Multi-Country	Global	✓			✓		✓			✓		✓	Insider/Outsider
3	ACORD	Rwanda	Local				✓			✓		✓			Insider
4	Adisco	Burundi	Local		✓		✓			✓					Insider
5	Adra	Angola	Local	✓					✓						Insider
6	Agromarket	Angola	Local	✓					✓						Insider
7	APAC	Mozambique	Local	✓			✓		✓				✓		Insider
8	APDIK	DRC	Local	✓					✓						Insider
9	Aquaculture Dialogues	Multi-Country	Global	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	Insider/Outsider
10	ASN strategic engagement	Netherlands	Netherlands					✓			✓				Insider
11	Baarsma Partnership	South Africa / Chile	Local			✓	✓					✓			Insider
12	BAIR	Rwanda	Local				✓			✓					Insider
13	BLACD	Egypt	Local	✓	✓					✓					Insider
14	Cacao project	Indonesia	Local	✓		✓							✓	✓	Insider
15	CAPAD	Burundi	Local		✓		✓			✓					Insider
16	CAPDC	Angola	Local				✓			✓					Insider
17	CEOSS	Egypt	Local	✓	✓										Insider
18	CLUSA	Mozambique	Local	✓			✓						✓		Insider
19	Common Code for the Coffee Community (4C)	Multi-Country	Global	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	Insider
20	COP	Niger	Local	✓			✓						✓		Insider
21	Cordaid, AIDenvironment	Indonesia	Local		✓								✓		Insider
22	CREAM	Rwanda	Local	✓			✓						✓		Insider
23	De Eerlijke Bankwijzer Campaign	Netherlands	Netherlands	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	Insider/Outsider
24	DUHAMIC	Rwanda	Local		✓		✓								Insider
25	Dutch Coffee Coalition	Netherlands	Netherlands	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓	Insider
26	Environmental Alert	Rwanda	Local	✓			✓								Insider
27	Equator Principles	Multi-Country	Global			✓		✓	✓					✓	Insider/Outsider
28	ESAFF	Uganda	Local		✓		✓								Insider
29	Ethical Tea Partnership	Indonesia	Local			✓	✓						✓		Insider
30	EADI	Nigeria	Local	✓	✓										Insider

No.	Partner	Country	Level	Intervention objective				Type of intervention				Oxfam's Role				Repertoire Approach
				Market	Technology	Rules	People	Regulation	Advocacy	Partnership	Fundraising	Funding	Capacity	Brokering	Advocacy	
31	Food Company Campaign	Multi-Country	Global	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	Insider/Outsider
32	Forest Stewardship Council	Multi-Country	Global				✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			Insider
33	Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)	Multi-Country	Global			✓	✓		✓							Insider/Outsider
34	Groene Sint Campaign	Netherlands	Netherlands	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓				Insider/Outsider
35	GROW Campaign	Multi-Country	Global	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓	Insider/Outsider
36	IKURU SARL	Mozambique	Local	✓						✓		✓				Insider
37	Imbaraga	Rwanda	Local				✓			✓		✓				Insider
38	IUCN, MCD, SNV	Vietnam	Local	✓		✓	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓	Insider
39	Io-In	Multi-Country	Global	✓			✓		✓			✓			✓	Insider
40	KIT, HIVOS, Solidaridad	Indonesia	Local		✓		✓			✓		✓	✓			Insider
41	Lutheran World Fed	Angola	Local				✓			✓		✓				Insider
42	Make Trade Fair Campaign	Multi-Country	Global	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓			✓	Insider/Outsider
43	NANTS	Nigeria	Local				✓			✓		✓	✓			Insider
44	NUON Partnership	Mali	Local		✓					✓		✓				Insider
45	OECD Guidelines on CSR	Multi-Country	Global			✓		✓	✓				✓			Insider/Outsider
46	PARE	Nigeria	Local	✓			✓			✓		✓	✓			Insider
47	PELUM	Uganda	Local	✓						✓		✓				Insider
48	Philips strategic partnership	Netherlands	Netherlands						✓		✓					Insider
49	Rabobank strategic engagement	Netherlands	Netherlands	✓			✓		✓				✓		✓	Insider
50	Roundtable on Responsible Soy	Multi-Country	Global					✓	✓							Outsider
51	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil	Multi-Country	Global	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓			Insider
52	RRDC	Nigeria	Local	✓				✓		✓		✓				Insider
53	Ruggie Principles on Business and Human Rights	Multi-Country	Global					✓								Insider/Outsider
54	SCA Strategic Partnership	South Sudan /Niger	Local		✓		✓			✓	✓				✓	Insider
55	Start People Strategic Partnership	Netherlands	Netherlands													Insider
56	The business Watch Indonesia	Indonesia	Local	✓		✓				✓		✓				Insider
57	Tropical Commodity Coalition	Multi-Country	Global	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓		✓	Insider
58	Ugeafi	DRC	Local	✓	✓	✓				✓		✓				Insider
59	Unilever Strategic Partnership	Multi-Country	Global	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓		✓	Insider
60	VEDCO	Rwanda	Local	✓	✓					✓		✓				Insider
61	WEMAN	Pan-Africa	Local				✓			✓		✓	✓			Insider
62	WWF Vietnam	Vietnam	Local			✓	✓			✓		✓				Insider
63	WWF Indonesia	Indonesia	Local	✓		✓				✓		✓		✓	✓	Insider
64	ZARDOZY	Pakistan	Local	✓			✓			✓		✓				Insider

ANNEX C – List of Members of the Critical NGO Alliance

Pisit Charnsnoh, Yadfon Association, Thailand
Khushi Kabir, Nijera Kori, Bangladesh
Riza Damanik, KIARA (Fisheries Justice Coalition), Indonesia
Alfredo Quarto, Mangrove Action Project
Maurizio Farhan Ferrari, Forest Peoples Programmeme, UK
Natasha Ahmad, ASIA Solidarity against Industrial Aquaculture, India
Gudrun Hubendick, Stockholm Society for Nature Conservation, Sweden
Don Staniford, Global Alliance against Industrial Aquaculture
Maria Delgado, ECOTERRA Intl.
Marieke Mutsaers, Trichilia ABC, Netherlands
Stanislav Lhota, Univ. of South Bohemia & Usti nad Labem Zoo, Czech Republic
Darlene Schanfald, Olympic Environmental Council, Sequim, Washington
Paula Palmer, Director Global Response Programme/Cultural Survival, Inc., USA
Diane Wilson, Calhoun County Resource Watch, USA
Dr. Wolfram Heise, The JAF Foundation, Switzerland
Foundation for Deep Ecology, USA
The Conservation Land Trust, USA, Argentina, Chile
Conservacion Patagonica, USA, Argentina
Fundacion Pumalin, USA, Chile
Joanna Levitt, International Accountability Project, USA
Gabriella Zanzanaini, Food & Water, Europe
Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director, Food & Water Watch, USA
Nina Holland, Corporate Europe Observatory, Belgium
DeeVon Quirolo, Co-Founder of Reef Relief, USA
Guadalupe Rodriguez, Salva la Selva, Spain
Klaus Schenck, Rettet den Regenwald, Germany
Béatrice Gorez, CFFA – CAPE, Belgium
Anne Petermann, Global Justice Ecology Project, USA
Mary Bricker-Jenkins, USA-Canada Alliance of Inhabitants (USACAI), USA
Robert Jereski, New York Climate Action Group, USA
Tim Keating, Rainforest Relief, USA
Sylvie Cardona, d'AVES, France
Herman Klosius, Informationsgruppe Lateinamerika – IGLA, Austria
Nian Dorry, Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, USA
Dan Silver, Endangered Habitats League, USA
Redmanglar Internacional, Latin America
Jorge Varela, CODDEFFAGOLF, Honduras
Henderson Colina, AEPA FALCON NGO, Venezuela
Alianza por los manglares, Litorales, Aguas y Suelos ALMAS REDMANGLAR, Venezuela
La Ventana AC de Mexico, Mexico
Juan Carlos Cardenas, Centro Ecoceanos, Chile
Teresa Perez, World Rainforest Movement, Uruguay
Nemesio Juan Rodríguez Mitchell, PUMC-UNAM sede Oaxaca, México
René Schärer, Instituto Terramar, Brazil
Manuela Díaz Ballesteros, Asociación de Pescadores, Campesinos, afro descendientes e Indígenas para el Desarrollo Comunitario de la Ciénaga Grande del Bajo Sinú, ASPROCIG, Colombia
Fundación Urundei, Salta, Argentina

Rezwana Hasan, Bangaldesh Environmental Lawyers' Association, Bangladesh
 Hasan Mehedi, Humanitywatch, Bangladesh
 Shamsul Huda, Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD), Bangladesh
 Meghnaguha Thakurata, Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), Bangladesh
 Philip Gain, Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), Bangladesh
 Khorshed Alam, Alternative Movement for Resources and Freedom Society, Bangladesh
 Anti-Debt Coalition (KAU), Indonesia
 Black Tiger Shrimp Farmers' Union (P3UW), Indonesia
 Institute of Global Justice (IGJ), Indonesia
 Berry Nahdian Furqon, Indonesia
 Ruddy Gustave, KONPHALINDO, Indonesia
 Muhammad Reza, Serikat Nelayan Indonesia / Indonesia Fisherfolk Union, Indonesia
 Nurhidayat Moenir, Jaringan Kerja Pemetaan Partisipatif (JKPP), Indonesia
 Geetha Lakmini, Food Sovereignty Network, Sri Lanka
 Herman Kumara, National Fisheries Solidarity Movement, Sri Lanka
 Shamith Roshan, Youth in Action (YinA), Sri Lanka
 Thomas Kocherry, National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF), India
 Bijaya Kumar Kabi, Action for Protection of Wild Animals (APOWA), India
 Kunal Deb, Uthnau, India.
 Samir Acharya, Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology, Port Blair, India
 Javier M. Claparols, Ecological Society of the Philippines, IUCN-CEESP, Philippines
 S.M. Mohamed Idris, Consumers' Association of Penang, Malaysia
 Meenakshi Raman, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia), Malaysia
 Chee Yoke Ling, Third World Network, Malaysia
 Akie Hart, Mangrove Forest Conservation Society of Nigeria
 Tekena Opukunachukwu, Grassroots Coalition for Transparency and Good Governance, Nigeria
 Nemi Tammuno, Rural Initiative for Community Empowerment, Nigeria
 Shedrach Philimon, Rural Communities Development Association, Nigeria
 Parker Lawson, Economic Empowerment and Environmental Protection Network, Nigeria
 Ibiwari Hector, Peace and Justice Foundation, Nigeria
 Henry Folawiyor, Child Rights Initiative, Nigeria
 Junior Pepple, Bethaisda Environmental Foundation, Nigeria
 Clifford Opusunju, Positive Change Advocates, Nigeria
 Nenibarini Zabbey, Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), Nigeria
 Ekindi Moudingo, Cameroon Wildlife Conservation Society, Cameroon
 Edem Edem, African Mangrove Network, Nigeria
 Wally Menne, Timberwatch Coalition, South Africa
 Rowland Benjamin, Information for Action, Perth, Western Australia
 Edda Kirleis, Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst EED, Germany
 Ashish Kothari, Kalpavriksh, India
 Abdoulaye Diame, WAAME, Senegal
 Jean-Marie Muanda, ADEV, Congo
 Orijemie Akpo Emuobosa, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
 Lydia Chaparro, Área Marina – Ecologistas en Acción, Spain
 Salomon Abresparr, Fältbiologerna – Nature and Youth, Sweden
 Centre National de Coopération au Développement, Belgium

Summary

This research project explores the increased engagement between NGOs and businesses around the creation of sustainability standards. In particular, this study analyzes how an international NGO – Oxfam – manages and leverages private sector engagement as a change strategy, including the inherent tensions and limitations that come with it. Oxfam International was created in 1942 to provide supplies during World War II. With 17 affiliates and presence in over 60 countries, Oxfam has since then become a global leader in delivering emergency relief and implementing long-term development programs in vulnerable communities around the world. Around the year 2000, Oxfam decided to institutionalize its engagement with the private sector, thus creating the Private Sector Program.

Part I of this book is largely dedicated to defining the boundaries of the research project; namely, the increased intersectoral collaboration in the context of sustainability and the introduction of certification as an instrument for private regulation. Furthermore, Parts I and II of the book explore the reasons why this study was conceived using an action research design. Action research is a research approach that allows researchers to work with others in generating new knowledge that is actionable, and which can be used to solve social problems or create opportunities for mutual reflection and learning.

In the particular case of this project, using an action research approach implied the following:

1. Engaging with practitioners in their daily activities by working at Oxfam Novib, the Dutch affiliate of Oxfam International, for 36 months where I joined the Private Sector Team.
2. Defining research questions and approaches together with practitioners in such a way that the research project became a joint endeavor.
3. Combining different research perspectives and methods to respond to the questions defined with practitioners, demanding that special attention was placed to flexibility and coherence.
4. Producing knowledge that was not only theoretically relevant, but also actionable and relevant for Oxfam's practice.
5. Writing this dissertation in the form of a journal in order to document and scrutinize the research process as a whole, and not only in terms of the results produced.

Because action research projects aim to solve real-world, practical problems, they often imply a (re)construction of meanings and the incorporation of new knowledge through cycles of action and reflection. In my project, I combined different epistemologies to answer the various research questions that the inquiry addressed.

Specifically, this implied constantly balancing between positivist and interpretative epistemological approaches. Overall, however, I consider that my research project falls more neatly in the interpretative tradition. Interpretative research approaches stress openness, multiplicity, and heterogeneity, actively paying attention to how meanings are articulated in context and (re)created through action and interaction. Moreover, interpretative approaches operate on the assumption that meanings are never fully fixed, but contested and negotiated by actors located in different fields of meaning.

The interpretative research approach aligns well with the different analytical lenses that I used throughout my project, namely, the concepts of politics of scale, portfolio analysis, theory of

change, and conversational framing. These theoretical notions served to make sense of the data collected during two and a half years of participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and conversations with practitioners at Oxfam Novib and beyond. This was supplemented with an extensive document and literature review. The qualitative data analysis took place in iterative phases conducted together with practitioners.

Already in my first exchanges with some members of Oxfam Novib's Private Sector Team I was able to identify a major gap in Oxfam's understanding of its practice. Oxfam is an NGO that subscribes to a particular type of approaches to international development: the rights based approaches. This family of approaches ground the development process in notions of agency, capability, entitlement, and freedom. Accordingly, NGOs that take a rights-based approach re-politicize some areas of development work, strengthening the status of citizens to rightful and legitimate claimants. These NGOs aim to transform power relations in the political struggle by changing the social structures of inequality, exclusion, and oppression.

This particular view of the development process poses important implications to the ways in which Oxfam goes about its development interventions, including those involving private sector engagement. When, during a conversation, we identified a gap in the way Oxfam Novib conceptualized the articulation of rights-based principles in private sector work, it became clear that that would become the first question to be addressed in the research project.

Accordingly, Part III of the book presents an analysis of the articulation of rights-based approaches to development in a particular type of private sector intervention, namely, multi-stakeholder private governance arrangements. Through an in-depth case study of Oxfam's intervention in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, Part III of the book analyzes the strategies employed to institutionalize a rights-based approach.

Based on the concept of politics of scale, this part of the book defined three dimensions at which NGO interventions may occur; namely, the creation of spaces of engagement, connecting spaces, and spaces of formal interdependence. Based on the empirical research, I was able to formulate some conclusions regarding the opportunities, challenges, and limitations that development NGOs meet when endorsing a rights-based approach in the context of private governance initiatives. One of the main conclusions of this Part is that human rights need to become prioritized and weighted against economic and environmental concerns, thus bringing tension to their indivisible and interdependent nature.

The results of this part of the project evidenced the need for an improved comprehension of the principles and assumptions on which Oxfam's private sector engagement was built on. In my interaction with practitioners, it became clear that Oxfam's approach towards engaging with firms, the so-called multi-faceted approach, needed more thorough scrutiny and enunciation. Consequently, together with the Private Sector Team, I determined that closer examination of a wide range of private sector interventions was necessary in order to characterize private sector engagement as a NGO change strategy.

Drawing on the theoretical notion of portfolio analysis, I constructed a private sector intervention portfolio together with members of the Private Sector Team. Accordingly, Part IV of this book presents a reconstruction of Oxfam's private sector theory of change and identifies the core competencies of Oxfam's Private Sector Program. Theories of change are conceptual representations that express how a program or project aims to move from a specific existing situation toward a desired end. Most frequently, theories of change are made up of the worldviews and underlying assumptions that people or teams have of a change process and their vision for the future.

My analysis of Oxfam's private sector theory of change revealed that in order to materialize a rights-based approach to poverty eradication based on private sector engagement, Oxfam had developed specific organizational competencies: First, a multi-faceted approach that allows Oxfam to pursue improved business behavior through a combination of interventions, ranging from critical to constructive, voiced from insider and outsider positions. Second, a systemic perspective that enables Oxfam to push for improvements at local, regional, and global levels, targeting entire sectors to realize mainstream transformation. Third, a collaborative outlook grounded on the realization that no societal actor can single-handedly eliminate injustice and the complex causalities of poverty, which motivates Oxfam to collaborate with a wide range of actors from the public and private spheres.

Analyzing a portfolio consisting of a sample of 64 private sector interventions, allowed to reveal portfolio dynamics and to identify some critical issues. Additionally, it showed that in order to increase synergy between interventions, communicate a consistent organizational identity and image, manage a multiplicity of relationships, and achieve political change, NGO intervention portfolios should be conformed and expanded from the perspective of core competencies instead of end goals or recipients.

As I was writing the results of the portfolio analysis, an alliance of NGOs publicly opposed Oxfam's involvement in the development of a certification standard for tropical farmed shrimp through the Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues. According to the 70+ NGOs that conformed such alliance, the farmed shrimp sector could by no means be made sustainable because of the negative impacts it posed on the environment and local communities. Oxfam, on the other hand, had participated in various efforts to create a sustainability standard under the belief that certification could serve as a stepping stone by improving production practices. Even though Oxfam and the critical NGO alliance agreed on the nature of the sustainability problem, they held different views about the mechanisms that could be used to achieve transformation.

This situation illustrated that when an NGO engages in a multi-stakeholder initiative that aims to develop a sustainability standard, it is forced to negotiate and come to agreements with multiple actors, whether allies or adversaries. In this sense, Part V of the book explores a so-called multiple-table situation by analyzing how conflicting and diverging positioning among NGO groups emerges and is managed.

Oxfam's Private Sector Team believed that investigating and documenting this case offered a unique learning opportunity, since it allowed for identifying inconsistencies and erroneous assumptions in its theory of change, in particular with regards to the potential and pitfalls of certification as a change mechanism, as well as assessing the deployment of a joint intervention strategy together with the critical NGO alliance.

To answer such questions, I performed a detailed analysis of a conversation recorded in emails exchanged between Oxfam and the critical NGO alliance regarding the issue of tropical shrimp certification. Using the notion of conversational framing, I found that the disagreement between Oxfam and the critical alliance was not so much about material or motivational aspects, but more about normative and strategic considerations. From this observation, I defined three attributes of framing as enacted by NGOs in the context of multi-stakeholder governance: ontological, normative, and strategic. These attributes then served as analytical lens to identify major points of contention between NGO groups and to illustrate the relationship between the specific frames enacted by an NGO and the roles that it is consequently able to play.

Part V of the book concludes showing how the dynamic interplay between NGO groups requires that goals become constantly (re)aligned and positions (re)negotiated, so that individual NGOs can maintain their independence while securing interdependence. While

NGOs that adopt fewer and more defined roles and positions have a clearer story to tell, NGOs that use a wide range of intervention approaches, like Oxfam, will have to make greater efforts to display a consistent organizational profile.

Lastly, Part VI of the book offers some conclusions and reflections on three different, but interconnected levels. First, the empirical evidence obtained from the analysis of Oxfam's private sector engagement strategy allows saying something about Oxfam. Key in this regard are the new understandings and conceptualizations about the roles played and the interaction sustained between private actors – NGOs and businesses – in the creation of novel sustainability standards to certify agri-food sectors.

Second, the evidence obtained in the realization of this project offers insights that are relevant for Oxfam. In this regard, discussing Oxfam's private sector engagement from the perspective of its rights-based approach to development, allowed for uncovering the potentials, constraints, and limitations underlying such a model of change.

Third, this book offers an insider's look into how this research project was realized. Its action research design helps to illuminate the interconnectedness of theory and practice and the role of the researcher in the inquiry process. Here, I made the research choices and assumptions explicit throughout my inquiry.

These three distinct levels of analysis are not independent from each other. Although in Part VI of the book I discuss them separately, in reality, analysis occurs at these three levels in an interwoven fashion. In the process of conducting action research, it is often difficult to separate what is relevant from the perspective of theory and practice. Theoretical insights emerge to support or challenge practical considerations and vice versa. What I hope to have illustrated in this research project is the way in which they become interconnected, making it difficult to say where one ends and the other begins.

Samenvatting

Dit onderzoek verkent de groeiende relaties tussen NGO's en bedrijven met betrekking tot de ontwikkeling van duurzaamheidstandaarden. In het bijzonder analyseert deze studie hoe een internationale NGO – Oxfam – omgaat met de private sector als onderdeel van haar veranderingsstrategie, met inbegrip van de inherente spanningen en beperkingen die dit met zich meebrengt. Oxfam International werd opgericht in 1942 om te voorzien in noodhulp tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Met 17 vestigingen en activiteiten in meer dan 60 landen is Oxfam sindsdien uitgegroeid tot een wereldwijde leider in het leveren van noodhulp en het implementeren van lange termijn ontwikkelingsprogramma's in kwetsbare gemeenschappen over de gehele wereld. Rond het jaar 2000 Oxfam besloot om haar relatie met de particuliere sector te institutionaliseren in het Private Sector Programma.

Deel I van dit boek is grotendeels gewijd aan het bepalen van de grenzen van het onderzoeksproject; namelijk de toegenomen intersectorale samenwerking in het kader van duurzaamheid en de introductie van certificering als instrument voor private regulering. Bovendien verkennen de delen I en II van het boek het gekozen actie-onderzoek design. Actie-onderzoek is een onderzoeksmethode waarmee onderzoekers werken met anderen in het genereren van nieuwe kennis die kan worden gebruikt om sociale problemen op te lossen of kansen te creëren voor gezamenlijke reflectie en leren.

In het specifieke geval van dit project impliceerde het werken met actie-onderzoek:

1. Het aangaan van een relatie met praktijkmensen in hun dagelijkse activiteiten bij Oxfam Novib, het Nederlandse filiaal van Oxfam International. Gedurende 36 maanden werkte ik als lid van het Private Sector team.
2. Het definiëren van onderzoeksvragen en benaderingen samen met de praktijkmensen op een zodanige wijze dat het onderzoeksproject een gezamenlijke inspanning werd.
3. De combinatie van verschillende onderzoeksmethoden en perspectieven om te kunnen reageren op de samen met de praktijkmensen gedefinieerde onderzoeksvragen. Dit vereiste speciale aandacht voor flexibiliteit en samenhang.
4. Het produceren van kennis die niet alleen theoretisch van belang is, maar ook bruikbaar en relevant voor Oxfam.
5. Het schrijven van dit proefschrift in de vorm van een dagboek om het onderzoeksproces als geheel te documenteren en te onderzoeken.

Omdat actie-onderzoek gericht is op het oplossen van actuele en praktijkproblemen impliceert dit vaak een (re)constructie van betekenissen en de integratie van nieuwe kennis in cycli van actie en reflectie. In mijn project combineerde ik verschillende epistemologieën om de verschillende onderzoeksvragen te beantwoorden.

Concreet betekende dit een voortdurend balanceren tussen positivistische en interpretatieve epistemologische benaderingen, alhoewel mijn onderzoeksproject overwegend in de interpretatieve traditie is te plaatsen. Interpretatief onderzoek benadrukt openheid en heterogeniteit door actief aandacht te besteden aan hoe betekenissen worden verwoord in een specifieke context en steeds weer gevormd worden in processen van actie en interactie. Interpretatieve benaderingen zijn bovendien gebaseerd op de veronderstelling dat betekenissen nooit volledig vast liggen, maar betwist en uitonderhandeld worden door partijen in verschillende betekenisgebieden.

De interpretatieve onderzoeksbenadering sluit goed aan bij de verschillende analytische lenzen die ik in mijn project gebruikte, namelijk de concepten *politics of scale*, portfolioanalyse, veranderingstheorie, en *conversational framing*. Deze theoretische noties dienden te helpen met de interpretatie van de onderzoeksgegevens die verzameld zijn gedurende twee en een half jaar participerende observatie, diepte-interviews en gesprekken met praktijkmensen binnen Oxfam Novib en daarbuiten. Dit werd aangevuld met een uitgebreide documentanalyse en literatuuronderzoek. De kwalitatieve data-analyse vond plaats in iteratieve fasen, uitgevoerd met de praktijkmensen.

Al in mijn eerste contacten met enkele leden van Oxfam Novib's Private Sector team was ik in staat om een lacune in Oxfam's begrip van de praktijk te identificeren. Oxfam is een NGO die zich richt op een bepaald type van benaderingen van internationale ontwikkelingsprocessen: namelijk mensenrechten. Deze familie van benaderingen interpreteert het ontwikkelingsproces in termen van *agency*, capaciteiten, persoonlijke rechten en vrijheid. NGO's die een op rechten gebaseerde aanpak hanteren re-politiseren sommige aspecten van het ontwikkelingswerk en versterken de positie van burgers als rechtmatige en legitieme eisers in het proces. Deze NGO's streven ernaar om machtsverhoudingen te transformeren in de politieke strijd gericht op het veranderen van sociale structuren van ongelijkheid, uitsluiting en onderdrukking.

Deze specifieke interpretatie van het ontwikkelingsproces heeft belangrijke implicaties voor de manier waarop Oxfam omgaat met interventies in ontwikkelingsprocessen, inclusief die waarbij de private sector betrokken is. Toen we tijdens een gesprek een lacune identificeerden in de wijze waarop Oxfam Novib mensenrechtenprincipes in het private sector werk conceptualiseerde werd het duidelijk dat dit de eerste vraag van het onderzoek zou worden.

Daarop aansluitende presenteert deel III van het boek een analyse van de articulatie van de op het concept mensenrechten gebaseerde aanpak van ontwikkelingsprocessen in een bepaald type van private arrangementen. Dit deel omvat een diepgaande studie van Oxfam's interventie in de Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, met name gericht op de strategieën die gebruikt worden om een op mensenrechten gebaseerde aanpak te institutionaliseren.

Gebaseerd op het concept *politics of scale* worden drie dimensies aan NGO interventies onderscheiden, namelijk het creëren van ontmoetingsplaatsen, van aan elkaar gerelateerde plaatsen, en van plaatsen van formele onderlinge afhankelijkheid. Op basis van het empirisch onderzoek was ik in staat om een aantal conclusies te formuleren ten aanzien van de kansen, uitdagingen en beperkingen waarmee ontwikkelings-NGO's geconfronteerd worden bij hun pogingen om een mensenrechtenbenadering in private arrangementen te bevorderen. Een van de belangrijkste conclusies van dit deel is dat prioriteiten moeten worden bepaald wat betreft de verschillende mensenrechten en dat deze afgewogen moeten worden tegen economische en milieuoverwegingen.

De resultaten van dit deel van het project maakten duidelijk dat er behoefte was aan een beter begrip van de uitgangspunten en veronderstellingen van Oxfam's private sector betrokkenheid. Samen met het Private Sector team besloot ik dat nader onderzoek van een breed scala aan private interventies nodig zou zijn om de relatie met de private sector als een NGO-veranderingsstrategie te kunnen karakteriseren.

Op basis van de theoretische notie van portfolioanalyse construeerde ik met leden van het Private Sector team een private sector interventie portfolio. Deel IV van dit boek presenteert een reconstructie van Oxfam's private sector veranderingsstrategie en identificeert de kerncompetenties van Oxfam's private sector programma. Veranderingstheorieën zijn conceptuele voorstellingen die uitdrukken hoe een programma of project beoogt om van een specifieke bestaande situatie naar een gewenste eindsituatie te komen. Vaak omvatten

veranderingsstrategieën wereldbeelden en onderliggende veronderstellingen die mensen of teams hebben van een veranderingsproces en hun visie op de toekomst.

Mijn analyse van Oxfam's private sector veranderingsstrategie liet zien dat Oxfam specifieke organisatorische competenties had ontwikkeld voor de op mensenrechten gebaseerde benadering van armoedebestrijding in de contacten met de private sector. Ten eerste, een veelzijdige aanpak die het mogelijk maakt dat Oxfam bedrijven tot verbetering kan stimuleren door middel van een combinatie van interventies, variërend van een kritische tot een constructieve benadering die gekozen kunnen worden vanuit een *insider* of een *outsider* positie. Ten tweede, een systeembenadering die Oxfam in staat stelt aan te dringen op verbeteringen op lokaal, regionaal en mondiaal niveau, en die gericht is op transformaties van grote private sectoren. Ten derde, een op samenwerking gerichte aanpak gebaseerd op het besef dat geen maatschappelijke actor zelfstandig handelend onrechtvaardigheid en de complexe oorzaken van armoede kan elimineren. Dit motiveert Oxfam om samen te werken met een groot aantal actoren uit de publieke en private sfeer.

De analyse van een portfolio bestaande uit een steekproef van 64 private sector interventies onthulde de portfolio dynamiek en maakte het mogelijk om een aantal kritieke punten te identificeren. Bovendien bleek dat om de synergie tussen interventies te verhogen, een consequente organisatorische identiteit te communiceren, en een veelheid aan relaties te managen, alsmede politieke verandering te realiseren, het nodig is om interventie portfolio's vanuit het perspectief van kerncompetenties op te zetten in plaats van einddoelen of ontvangers.

Terwijl ik de resultaten van de portfolio analyse aan het schrijven was, sprak een alliantie van NGO's zich uit tegen de betrokkenheid van Oxfam bij de ontwikkeling van een duurzaamheidsstandaard voor certificering van tropisch gekweekte garnalen in de *Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues*. Volgens de 70+ NGO's die een alliantie vormden kan de gekweekte garnalen sector op geen enkele wijze duurzaam worden als gevolg van de negatieve effecten op het milieu en voor de lokale gemeenschappen. Oxfam daarentegen had deelgenomen aan diverse pogingen om een norm voor duurzaamheid te ontwikkelen in de veronderstelling dat certificering een opstap kan zijn voor verbeterde productiepraktijken. Hoewel Oxfam en de kritische NGO alliantie het eens waren over de aard van het probleem, hadden ze verschillende opvattingen over de mechanismen die kunnen worden gebruikt om een transformatie te realiseren.

Deze situatie illustreert dat wanneer een NGO participeert in een samenwerking met de private sector met het doel een duurzaamheidsstandaard te ontwikkelen, zij gedwongen wordt om te onderhandelen en tot afspraken te komen met meerdere actoren, zowel bondgenoten als tegenstanders. Het vijfde deel van het boek onderzoekt een situatie waarin sprake is van onderhandelingen aan meerdere tafels en analyseert hoe tegenstrijdige en uiteenlopende positioneringen van NGOs zich ontwikkelen en gemanaged worden.

Oxfam's private sector team meende dat het onderzoeken en documenteren van deze casus een unieke gelegenheid zou bieden om te leren. Verwacht werd dat de analyse zou bijdragen aan het identificeren van inconsistenties en verkeerde veronderstellingen in de veranderingsstrategie, in het bijzonder met betrekking tot de mogelijkheden en valkuilen van certificering als een veranderingsmechanisme. Ook zou de analyse meer kennis kunnen opleveren voor de uitvoering van een gezamenlijke interventiestrategie met de kritische NGO alliantie.

Om dergelijke vragen te beantwoorden voerde ik een gedetailleerde analyse uit van de e-mail conversatie tussen Oxfam en de kritische NGO alliantie met betrekking tot de kwestie van de tropische garnalen certificering. Met behulp van de notie van conversatie framing, vond ik dat

het meningsverschil tussen Oxfam en de kritische alliantie niet zozeer ging over materiële zaken of motivationele aspecten, maar meer over de normatieve en strategische overwegingen. Vanuit deze observatie definieerde ik drie karakteristieken van framing in een situatie waarin meerdere en diverse partijen samenwerken: ontologische, normatieve en strategische karakteristieken. Deze dienden als analytische lens om de grote twistpunten tussen NGOs te identificeren en om de relatie tussen de specifieke 'frames' en de rollen die door een NGO worden gespeeld te illustreren.

Deel V van het boek laat zien hoe de dynamische wisselwerking tussen groepen van NGOs vereist dat doelen voortdurend worden herijkt en posities worden heronderhandeld, zodat individuele NGO's hun zelfstandigheid kunnen behouden, terwijl hun onderlinge afhankelijkheid wordt verzekerd. Terwijl NGO's die minder en meer strikt gedefinieerde rollen en posities innemen een duidelijker verhaal te vertellen hebben, zullen NGO's die een breed scala aan interventies toepassen, zoals Oxfam, grotere inspanningen moeten leveren om een consistent organisatieprofiel waar te maken.

Ten slotte biedt deel VI van het boek een aantal conclusies en reflecties op drie verschillende, maar onderling verbonden niveaus. Ten eerste maakt het empirisch bewijs verkregen uit de analyse van Oxfam's private sector strategie het mogelijk iets te zeggen over Oxfam. Centraal staan het nieuwe begrip en de conceptualisering van de posities die worden ingenomen en de rollen die worden vervuld in de interacties tussen private actoren - NGO's en bedrijven - in de ontwikkeling van nieuwe duurzaamheidsstandaarden om de landbouwvoedingssector te certificeren.

Ten tweede bieden de resultaten van het onderzoek inzichten die relevant zijn voor Oxfam. In dit verband opende de discussie van Oxfam's betrokkenheid bij de private sector vanuit het perspectief van mensenrechten de mogelijkheid om de potenties en beperkingen te verhelderen die aan zo een veranderingsmodel ten grondslag liggen.

Ten derde biedt dit boek een insiders blik in hoe dit onderzoeksproject werd gerealiseerd. Het actie-onderzoeksmodel helpt om de verwevenheid van theorie en praktijk en de rol van de onderzoeker in het onderzoeksproces te belichten. Hier maakte ik de onderzoekskeuzen en assumpties in mijn onderzoeksproces expliciet.

Deze drie verschillende niveaus van analyse kunnen niet onafhankelijk van elkaar worden beschouwd. Hoewel ik ze in deel VI van het boek apart bespreek, zijn zij in werkelijkheid verweven. In het proces van actie-onderzoek is vaak moeilijk te onderscheiden wat relevant is vanuit theorie en praktijk. Theoretische inzichten ontstaan om praktijken te ondersteunen of ter discussie te stellen en praktische overwegingen kunnen theorieën ter discussie stellen. Met dit onderzoeksproject hoop ik geïllustreerd te hebben hoe ze met elkaar verbonden zijn, waardoor het moeilijk is om te zeggen waar het ene eindigt en het andere begint.

Sinopsis

Este proyecto de investigación analiza la colaboración entre las ONG y el sector privado en torno a la creación de estándares de sostenibilidad. En particular, este estudio analiza cómo una ONG internacional - Oxfam - gestiona y aprovecha la colaboración con el sector privado como estrategia de cambio, incluyendo sus tensiones y limitaciones inherentes.

Oxfam Internacional fue creada en 1942 para proporcionar ayuda humanitaria durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Con 17 filiales y presencia en más de 60 países, Oxfam se ha convertido en uno de los líderes mundiales en la ejecución de programas de desarrollo en comunidades vulnerables. Alrededor del año 2000, Oxfam creó el Programa del Sector Privado como medida para institucionalizar su creciente interacción con empresas y desarrollar innovadores proyectos colaborativos para lograr un mayor impacto.

La Parte I de este libro está mayormente dedicada a la definición de los temas centrales del proyecto de investigación; a saber, el aumento de la colaboración intersectorial en el contexto de la sostenibilidad y la introducción de la certificación como instrumento de regulación privada, así como la creación de una visión de desarrollo social basada en los Derechos Humanos.

Asimismo, en las Partes I y II del libro exploro las razones por las cuales este estudio utiliza un diseño de investigación-acción. La investigación-acción es un método de investigación que permite a los investigadores trabajar con otros en la generación de nuevos conocimientos que se utilizan para resolver problemas sociales y crear espacios de reflexión y aprendizaje mutuo.

En el caso particular de este proyecto, utilizar un enfoque de investigación-acción implicó lo siguiente:

1. Participar durante dos años y medio en las actividades cotidianas del Programa del Sector Privado dentro de Oxfam Novib, la filial holandesa de Oxfam Internacional.
2. Definir las preguntas y enfoques de investigación en conjunto con Oxfam, de tal manera que el proyecto de investigación se convirtiera en un esfuerzo común.
3. Combinar diferentes perspectivas y métodos de investigación para responder a las preguntas definidas en conjunto con Oxfam, lo cual exigió asegurar flexibilidad y coherencia en el proyecto.
4. Producir conocimiento de que sea sólo teóricamente relevante, sino también aplicable a la práctica de Oxfam en forma de acciones concretas y relevantes.
5. Escribir esta tesis a manera de diario con el fin de documentar y examinar el proceso de investigación en su conjunto y no sólo en términos de los resultados producidos.

Dado que los proyectos de investigación-acción tienen por objeto resolver problemas del mundo real, a menudo demandan la (re)construcción de significados y la incorporación de nuevos conocimientos a través de ciclos de acción y reflexión. En mi proyecto, este proceso se hace palpable en cada parte del libro, las cuales combinan diferentes métodos y perspectivas analíticas para responder a las diversas preguntas de investigación.

Aunque esto implicó buscar un equilibrio entre enfoques epistemológicos positivistas e interpretativos, considero que mi proyecto de investigación se inscribe más claramente en la tradición interpretativa. La investigación interpretativa pone énfasis en la apertura, la multiplicidad y la heterogeneidad, prestando atención a la forma en que los significados se articulan dentro de un contexto y se (re)crean a través de la acción y la interacción. Los

enfoques interpretativos asumen que los significados no son totalmente fijos, sino mediados y configurados por los actores sociales.

El enfoque de investigación interpretativa se alinea bien con las diferentes perspectivas analíticas y métodos que he utilizado a lo largo de mi proyecto, específicamente, los conceptos de la política de escala (*politics of scale*), análisis de portafolios (*portfolio analysis*), la teoría de cambio (*theory of change*), y el encuadre de la conversación (*conversational framing*). Estas nociones teóricas sirven para analizar y dar sentido a los datos recogidos a través de dos años y medio de observación participante en Oxfam Novib, entrevistas a profundidad y conversaciones con el equipo del Sector Privado. El análisis de los datos, mayormente cualitativos, se realizó en fases iterativas en conjunto con los profesionales y se complementó con una revisión extensa de documentos y literatura científica.

Durante mis primeras conversaciones con algunos miembros del equipo del Programa del Sector Privado logré identificar una pregunta básica sobre la perspectiva o modelo desde la cual Oxfam conceptualiza su estrategia de cambio y modelo de desarrollo.

Oxfam es una ONG que se suscribe a un determinado tipo de visión de desarrollo internacional, la cual está basada en los derechos humanos. Este enfoque ancla el proceso de desarrollo en las nociones de agencia, capacidad, derecho y libertad. En consecuencia, las ONG que basan su trabajo en la protección y promoción de los derechos humanos, buscan re-politizar algunas áreas del desarrollo y fortalecer la posición de los ciudadanos. Estas ONG tienen como objetivo transformar las relaciones de poder en la lucha política y las estructuras sociales que promueven la desigualdad, la exclusión y la opresión.

Esta visión particular del proceso de desarrollo tiene implicaciones importantes para la forma en que Oxfam diseña sus intervenciones o programas, incluidos aquellos relacionados con el sector privado. En este sentido, la primera pregunta de investigación que identificamos fue sobre la articulación de principios de derechos humanos en sus intervenciones del sector privado.

Así, la Parte III del libro presenta un análisis de la articulación de derechos humanos en un tipo particular de intervención del sector privado: estándares de sostenibilidad creados colaborativamente entre las empresas y las ONG. A través de un estudio de caso en profundidad sobre la intervención de Oxfam en la Mesa Redonda sobre Aceite de Palma Sostenible (*Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil*), esta parte del libro analiza las estrategias empleadas por Oxfam para institucionalizar un enfoque de derechos humanos dentro de esta iniciativa.

Basado en el concepto de políticas de escala (*politics of scale*), esta parte del libro define tres dimensiones en las que pueden llevarse a cabo las intervenciones de las ONG: la creación de espacios de participación, espacios de conexión y espacios de interdependencia formal. A partir de la evidencia empírica, formulé algunas conclusiones con respecto a las oportunidades, retos y limitaciones que experimentan las ONG al tratar de articular principios de derechos humanos en iniciativas voluntarias de certificación. Una de las principales conclusiones de esta parte del libro establece que, en iniciativas de sostenibilidad, los derechos humanos frecuentemente deberán de ser ponderados en relación a los intereses económicos y ambientales, lo cual se complica todavía más debido a la naturaleza indivisible e interdependiente de los derechos humanos.

Los resultados de esta parte del proyecto demostraron la necesidad de lograr una mejor comprensión de los principios y supuestos sobre los que Oxfam definía sus intervenciones relacionadas con el sector privado. Específicamente, se hizo evidente que la estrategia de Oxfam en su vinculación con el sector privado, llamado el enfoque multifacético, necesitaba de un análisis más minucioso y de una enunciación más clara. Junto con el equipo del Programa

del Sector Privado, determiné que un análisis más detallado de una amplia gama de intervenciones del sector privado era necesaria para poder caracterizar la colaboración con el sector privado como estrategia de cambio de las ONG.

Utilizando la noción teórica de análisis de portafolios (*portfolio analysis*), construí un portafolio de intervenciones del sector privado en conjunto con los miembros del equipo del Sector Privado. Así, la Parte IV de este libro presenta una reconstrucción de la teoría de cambio utilizada por Oxfam e identifica las competencias básicas del Programa del Sector Privado. Las teorías del cambio son representaciones conceptuales que expresan la forma en que un programa o proyecto pretende transformar una situación existente en un fin deseado. Generalmente, las teorías del cambio se componen de las visiones del mundo y los supuestos que las personas o los equipos tienen de un proceso de cambio y su visión para el futuro.

Mi análisis de la teoría de cambio del Programa del Sector Privado de Oxfam reveló que, con el fin de materializar un enfoque basado en los derechos humanos en sus iniciativas, Oxfam había desarrollado competencias organizacionales específicas: En primer lugar, el enfoque multifacético que permite a Oxfam promover mejores prácticas empresariales a través de una combinación de intervenciones, que van desde la crítica constructiva hasta la difamación pública, y que pueden ser expresadas desde posiciones de infiltrado o de aliado. En segundo lugar, una perspectiva sistémica que permite a Oxfam impulsar mejoras a nivel local, regional y global simultáneamente, enfocada en realizar transformación a escala sectorial. En tercer lugar, una actitud de colaboración anclada en la percepción de que ningún actor social puede eliminar por sí solo la injusticia y la pobreza, lo que motiva a Oxfam a colaborar con una amplia gama de actores de los ámbitos públicos y privados.

Por otra parte, el análisis de un portafolio conformado por una muestra de 64 intervenciones en el sector privado, permitió revelar la dinámica del portafolio e identificar algunos temas críticos. En este sentido, la Parte IV del libro argumenta que, con el fin de aumentar la sinergia entre intervenciones, comunicar una identidad organizacional coherente, gestionar una multiplicidad de relaciones y lograr el cambio político, los portafolios de intervención de las ONG deben ser conformados a partir de las competencias básicas de la organización y no a partir metas o receptores finales.

Mientras escribía los resultados del análisis del portafolio, una alianza de ONG se opuso públicamente a la participación de Oxfam en el desarrollo de un nuevo estándar de certificación para camarón de cultivo a través de los Diálogos sobre Acuicultura (*Shrimp Aquaculture Dialogues*). Según esta alianza crítica de más de 70 ONG, el sector de camarón de cultivo de ninguna manera podría ser sostenible debido a sus impactos negativos en el medio ambiente y las comunidades locales.

Oxfam, por su parte, había participado en diversos esfuerzos para crear estándares de sostenibilidad para el sector bajo la creencia de que la certificación podría servir como punto de partida para mejorar las prácticas de producción. A pesar de que Oxfam y la alianza crítica coincidían en la definición de las causas e impactos del problema de sostenibilidad en el sector de camarón de cultivo, tenían diferentes puntos de vista sobre los mecanismos que se podrían utilizar para lograr una transformación positiva.

Esta situación demuestra que cuando una ONG se involucra en una iniciativa multilateral que tiene como objetivo desarrollar un estándar de sostenibilidad, se ve obligada a negociar y llegar a acuerdos con múltiples actores, ya sean aliados o adversarios. Mediante el análisis del posicionamiento de diversas ONG, la Parte V del libro explora cómo surgen y se gestionan encuadres, o puntos de vista, conflictivos u opuestos.

Para responder a estas preguntas, realicé un análisis detallado de una conversación registrada en correos electrónicos intercambiados entre Oxfam y distintos miembros de la alianza crítica en relación con el tema de la certificación de camarones de cultivo. Aplicando la noción de encuadre de conversación (*framing analysis*), identifiqué que el desacuerdo entre Oxfam y la alianza crítica no era tanto por aspectos materiales o de motivación, sino más bien por consideraciones normativas y estratégicas.

A partir de esta observación, definí tres atributos de encuadre, o *framing*, utilizados por las ONG en este contexto: ontológicos, normativos y estratégicos. Estos atributos luego sirvieron como perspectiva analítica para identificar los principales puntos de discordia entre las distintas ONG e ilustrar la relación entre los encuadres promulgados por una organización y el papel que, en consecuencia, es capaz de jugar.

La Parte V del libro concluye mostrando cómo la interacción dinámica entre distintos grupos de ONG requiere que los objetivos sean constantemente (re)alineados y (re)negociados, para que cada ONG pueda mantener su independencia mientras asegura la interdependencia. Mientras que las organizaciones no gubernamentales que adoptan roles y posiciones definidas tienen una historia más clara que contar, las ONG que combinan varios modelos de intervención – como Oxfam – tendrán que hacer mayores esfuerzos para mostrar un perfil organizacional coherente.

La investigación y documentación de este caso ofreció una oportunidad única de aprendizaje al permitir la identificación de inconsistencias y supuestos erróneos en la teoría del cambio de Oxfam, sobre todo con respecto a las oportunidades y limitantes de la certificación como un mecanismo de cambio, así como a la implementación de una intervención diseñada en conjunto con otros actores.

Por último, la Parte VI del libro ofrece algunas conclusiones y reflexiones en tres niveles de análisis diferentes, pero conectados entre sí. En primer lugar, la evidencia empírica obtenida a partir del análisis de la estrategia de intervención de Oxfam en el sector privado permite decir algo acerca de Oxfam. Clave en este sentido es la creciente interacción entre actores privados - ONG y empresas - para la creación de nuevos estándares de sostenibilidad para certificar los sectores agroalimentarios, así como las nuevas interpretaciones y conceptualizaciones sobre las funciones que cada actor desempeña.

En segundo lugar, la evidencia obtenida en la realización de este proyecto es relevante para la práctica de Oxfam. Por ejemplo, evaluar la colaboración de Oxfam con el sector privado desde la perspectiva de su modelo de desarrollo, permitió el descubrimiento de las oportunidades, restricciones y limitaciones que ofrece un modelo de cambio basado en la protección y promoción de los derechos humanos.

En tercer lugar, este libro ofrece un relato transparente del proceso de investigación. Su diseño basado en la investigación-acción ayuda a mostrar la interconexión de la teoría y la práctica, así como el papel del investigador en el proceso de investigación.

Estos tres niveles diferentes de análisis no son independientes el uno del otro. Aunque en la Parte VI del libro, los analizo por separado, en la realidad, el análisis se produce en estos tres niveles de forma entrelazada. En el proceso de la investigación-acción, a menudo es difícil separar lo que es relevante desde la perspectiva de la teoría y la práctica. Los conocimientos teóricos surgen para afirmar o desafiar las consideraciones prácticas y viceversa. Precisamente, lo que espero haber ilustrado en este proyecto de investigación es la forma en que se entrelazan, siendo difícil decir dónde termina uno y comienza el otro.

About the author

Luz de Lourdes (Luli) Pesqueira Fernández was born in Mexico City in 1981. She holds a BA degree in Communications from Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City. After graduating, she worked for a few years in the marketing and sponsorship industry with a strong focus on market research.

In 2006, she opted for a career change and moved to the Netherlands to pursue an MSc in Sustainable Development at Utrecht University with the support of the Mexican Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT). During her master studies, Luli became particularly interested in the potential contributions of private actors to solving sustainability problems. In this regard, her master thesis explored the formation and function of private partnership networks in the global cocoa sector and their contribution to solving serious sustainability challenges, such as the use of child labor in cocoa production.

In 2010, Luli began working on her PhD research, also carried out at Utrecht University under the umbrella of the Maastricht, Utrecht, Nijmegen Program on Partnerships (MUNPOP). Her dissertation studied the collaboration between NGOs and the private sector, particularly for the creation of sustainability certification standards for agro-commodities (e.g. cocoa, palm oil, soy, and tropical shrimps).

She has been trained in qualitative and action research methods, as well as in various techniques including the analysis of discourses, global value chains, networks, public policies, portfolios, and stakeholders. Some of her interests include, sustainable agri-food systems, ethical and fair-trade supply chain systems, corporate social responsibility in emerging markets, human rights, private regulation as a form of social innovation, and new governance arrangements for sustainable development.

Luli currently lives in Mexico City and works at EGADE Business School, Tecnológico de Monterrey, where she dedicates her time to teaching, writing, and designing novel, tailor-made Executive Education programs for top firms.

