Making sense of evaluation results with civil society partners is a growing practice in Oxfam Novib’s formative and evaluative research. Participatory reflection sessions create meaningful opportunities for civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to take ownership of evaluation findings and to ensure a more nuanced understanding of them. These reflection sessions also constitute an important step towards greater social accountability whereby the people and communities Oxfam works with, engage with the findings to support the interpretation of results and assess how to apply them in their decision making.
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Key Messages

- **Evaluators are accountable to the people** Oxfam Novib and partner organizations work with, both within projects and in evaluations themselves.

- **Social accountability in evaluation can be achieved** when citizens and civil society have the tools to hold evaluators accountable. Their most powerful tool is the experiential knowledge of the context in which the outcomes and results of evaluations are situated.

- **Participatory reflection sessions**, where evaluators work with civil society, NGOs, and community stakeholders to take ownership of the evaluation findings and ensure a more nuanced understanding of them, are a critical tool for building greater social accountability.

- **The development and humanitarian sector should do more** to involve partners, including communities, in the design, implementation, as well as evaluation of programs.

- **Participatory reflection sessions are an imperfect** but pragmatic tool for building greater social accountability.

Introduction

Few evaluators in the development and humanitarian fields would disagree that people who participate in an evaluation should benefit from the knowledge it generates. To do so, they need to know the outcomes of an evaluation and what will be done with those results. However, in practice, people and communities who participate in evaluations are rarely informed about their outcomes. Few evaluators bring their results back to the people and communities where the data came from in the first place. Participatory reflection sessions on evaluation findings and outcomes are one tool Oxfam has used to bring evaluation findings and outcomes back to the people and communities we work with. This article explores the possibilities, as well as the limits, of these sessions, through follow-up interviews with recent participants.

We contend that evaluators are accountable to the people and communities organizations work with, both within projects and in evaluations themselves. **Social accountability in evaluation can be achieved** when citizens and civil society have tools to hold evaluators accountable for their evaluations. The most basic of these tools is knowledge of the outcomes and results of evaluations. One method for sharing this knowledge is through participatory reflection sessions, where evaluators work with civil society organizations (CSOs), partner organizations, and people we work with in programs themselves to make sense of evaluation results and the knowledge the evaluation generates is fed back into the communities where it belongs. Thereby, session participants...
take ownership of the evaluation findings and further cascade those results to others in the communities they live and work.

In this article, we briefly retrace the evolution of the concept of accountability in an evaluation and argue that evaluators are accountable to the people and communities that not only participate in programs or projects, but also in evaluations. We introduce the concept of participatory reflection sessions as used by Oxfam and describe recent examples of sessions held in Ethiopia and Niger. Drawing on interviews with reflection session participants, we find that these reflection sessions have contributed to greater social accountability, although much more remains to be done. We conclude with recommendations about deepening and broadening the involvement of CSOs, NGOs, and people and communities we work with in future reflection sessions and possibilities for further strengthening social accountability in evaluation work.

Accountable to whom?

Who are evaluators in the development and humanitarian sector accountable to? Historically, program evaluation has focused on providing accountability to policymakers, donors, and funders to show that resources invested in programs are achieving their intended purposes (Madaus and Stufflebeam, 2000). As classical monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has evolved into “monitoring, evaluation and learning” (MEL) or even “monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning” (MEAL) (Madaus and Stufflebeam, 2000), notions of accountability have expanded along with the acronyms. Many organizations in the development and humanitarian sector have committed themselves to being accountable not only to donors but also to their employees, supporters, and sometimes also the people and communities they work with. This is sometimes referred to as “downward accountability,” in contrast to “upward accountability” towards funders (Ebrahim, 2010). We consciously avoid using these terms ourselves so as not to legitimize the hierarchical power relationships they evoke. Accountability at its root is about responsibility: being accountable means being held responsible for what you do (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). We understand social accountability broadly to mean engagement on the part of citizens and civil society to hold those in positions of power responsible for their actions and obligations (Houtzager and Joshi, 2008).

To realize social accountability in practice, we must bring evaluation results and findings back to the communities that informed evaluations, thereby providing the tools those communities need to hold us accountable for our work. As evaluator and researcher Christian Kashurha has pointed out in an influential blog post, “the communities in which we carry out research projects must be informed of our findings; they must be given a stake in the research results. Otherwise, what is the point of research?” (2019). But this is rarely done in practice. When not required by donors, going back to people and communities that participated in evaluations can be difficult to prioritize and plan for, even more so to budget for. The task may be further complicated by language barriers, limited literacy and numeracy, long distances to cover, and other challenges. As a result, many evaluators stop at posting their evaluation reports online. However, this leaves evaluation findings well out of the reach of many. To achieve social accountability, we must do more.

Making sense of evaluation results with key stakeholders

Oxfam engages all stakeholders in its programs in participatory reflection sessions to make sense of formative and evaluative research results. Partner
CSOs and project participants are key stakeholders we seek to involve.

Participatory reflection sessions have three principal goals. First, they provide an opportunity for different people involved in the program to verify and validate findings. This enables more nuanced and better-grounded conclusions. Second, they build ownership of the results among stakeholders and increase the likelihood that results will be used in programs. Third, they help close the social accountability gap by sharing findings with the people who provided the data. Ideally, these stakeholders share what they have learned with others in the communities where they live and work, cascading the information to those who might not access it otherwise.

The degree to which these goals are met varies from project to project. Some evaluations are fully participatory and people-led, while others may involve a smaller and narrower group of participants. Sessions may be in-person, online, or a blend of the two and can range from shorter sessions focused on top-line findings that may run as little as a few hours to as long as three days. This article highlights two participatory reflection sessions that took different forms with different types of stakeholder engagement (see Table 1 for an overview).

The first example is from Ethiopia, a country where Oxfam implements its Empower Youth for Work (EYW) program. EYW is a five-year program funded by the IKEA Foundation that focuses on enabling young women and men in rural areas affected by climate change to seek and obtain economic independence. We will highlight two reflection sessions as part of the EYW program in Ethiopia. The first was a participatory group analysis of qualitative research into the factors that contribute to business start-ups' success, led by young men and women. The second was a reflection on the results of a quantitative impact evaluation conducted halfway through the program. Young people themselves were at the center of both these sessions.
Our second example comes from the program “Towards a worldwide influencing network,” led by a strategic partnership (SP) between the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oxfam Novib, and the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO). In 2019, Oxfam completed a quantitative impact evaluation that tracked changes in citizen activism on fiscal justice in Niger, one of the program countries. Oxfam organized a half-day reflection session with program staff and representatives of two partners in Niger to interpret the findings and formulate conclusions and recommendations.

These two very different examples illustrate how a participatory reflection workshop can be organized. We note that organizing effective reflection sessions poses some important dilemmas. Decisions about the venue (capital city or rural area?), format (in-person, online or blended? Unilingual or with simultaneous translation?), content, and tone influence who will attend and participate actively. Decisions about which findings to share with which audiences need careful consideration. Some evaluation findings may be susceptible in a given context. Imagine an evaluation that finds that most people condone a harmful cultural practice like female genital mutilation or child marriage, or a finding that draws unwanted attention to partner organizations in a context of shrinking civic space. In these cases, evaluators must strike a careful balance between a commitment to transparency and disclosure and the imperative of doing no harm through the dissemination of sensitive findings or those that could be easily misconstrued.

Have reflection sessions fostered greater social accountability?

Both Ethiopia and Niger experiences provided valuable insights into the potential and limits of participatory reflection sessions as a tool for greater social accountability. Our sample included two participants in Niger and eight participants in Ethiopia. Seven interviewees were staff members of partner organizations working with Oxfam in these countries and one was an Oxfam staff-member. Two were young people participating in the EYW program in Ethiopia. Interviewees were asked to provide brief written responses on-line to a short set of questions.

| Table 1: Snapshot of two participatory reflection sessions conducted by Oxfam |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Reflection session participants** | **GOALS** | **Verifying and validating research findings** | **Formulating program management response** | **Sharing findings with the people who provided the data** |
| EYW Ethiopia | Researcher | Shared analysis of part of the data. | Concrete program responses for the remaining years of the program. | Developing concrete stories for influencing based on the findings. |
| | Youth group members | Shared interpretation of findings. | | |
| | Youth enumerators | | | |
| | Oxfam staff | | | |
| | Partner staff | | | |
| | Government institutions (working on youth empowerment) | | | |
| SP Niger | Researcher | | | |
| | Oxfam staff | Shared interpretation of findings | | |
| | Partner staff | | | |

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First, we asked what participants felt they learned from the reflection sessions they attended and how they used the results. All interviewees reported taking away important learnings from the reflection sessions they attended, ranging from the top-line findings, to the program implications of these results, to a better appreciation of the steps of an evaluation process. Most interviewees reported that they put these results to use in their work after the reflection session, including in influencing work, program adaptation, and fund-raising.

We also asked whether reflection session participants shared evaluation findings with others and with whom. One interviewee in Niger reported disseminating key results to CSO partners via social media and in-person meetings. Among the recipients were members of CSOs organized across Niger that are actively lobbying for fiscal justice. However, this respondent noted that this sharing could have been more comprehensive, especially if all materials had been available in French (most were, though not all). In Ethiopia, one interviewee mentioned sharing and discussing findings with local implementing partners and government stakeholders.

We also asked interviewees what barriers stand in the way of deeper involvement of local NGOs and CSOs in evaluations. Interviewees in Ethiopia mentioned the absence of platforms to facilitate their engagement, limited ownership of evaluation processes and findings, limited capacity to engage, and high staff turnover, as well as funding constraints. Some interviewees also mentioned that donors and international NGOs (INGOs) do not always welcome the involvement of CSOs and NGOs in evaluation. CSOs are often not strong enough to demand that they be included, or there is limited space for CSOs and NGOs to express their interests to implementing organizations or donors. Interviewees in Niger similarly mentioned the limited capacity of NGOs and CSOs to engage in evaluation processes and financial constraints. How could these barriers be overcome? Interviewees proposed establishing standing multi-stakeholder platforms to involve NGOs and CSOs more permanently in INGOs' evaluation work. Some also mentioned working with NGOs and CSOs to "tool-up" in terms of evaluation skills to facilitate their participation, for example, through support to national organizations of MEAL professionals and more workshops for sharing evaluation results.

Participatory reflection sessions were broadly appreciated by interviewees (this is also supported by mini-evaluations conducted at the end of each session). Participants extracted useful information from these sessions that they applied in their own programmatic, influencing and fundraising work. Some interviewees cited reflection sessions themselves as one tool to help address barriers to greater participation in INGO evaluations.

Most interviewees described ways that they shared evaluation results and conclusions from these reflection sessions with others. Many of the recipients were colleagues in other NGOs, CSOs and government stakeholders that are affiliated with Oxfam or Oxfam’s partners. However, Ethiopia’s reflection session did involve several young women and men who were themselves participants in the EYW program and evaluation. The two young people interviewed indicated that they had developed a strong sense of ownership of the results from participating in the reflection workshops. They participated in determining what went well, what did not, and possible ways forward in project implementation. They have taken and shared these experiences with their peers and used them to influence their community, youth groups, partners, and government stakeholders. Similarly, an interviewee in Niger reported sharing evaluation outcomes with representatives of CSOs across the country, providing a direct link to communities where the evaluation was conducted. In these
cases, participatory reflection sessions have gotten evaluation outcomes and results closer to the hands of people and communities who provided the data in the first place. More can and should be done, for example, by directly involving more people who participated in the evaluation in these reflections and by sharing evaluation outcomes and results in more accessible and effective ways (adapted to local language contexts, ready for sharing via social media, or preparing more simple printed materials, as one interviewee suggested).

Next steps in closing the social accountability gap

Evaluators are accountable to people and communities that participate in our evaluations, and we need to do more to foster social accountability. Participatory reflection sessions are an imperfect but pragmatic, simple way to work towards greater social accountability to get evaluation outcomes and results into the hands of people who participated in the evaluation. This knowledge is the most elemental tool people need to hold evaluators accountable.

Our review of two recent reflection sessions shows that they can help close the social accountability gap. However, the sessions do not produce this outcome automatically. We must design and run sessions that encourage the participation of those we most want to engage, not just local partners and professionals in the countries where we work. We must be attentive to the location, format, and content of sessions, and ensure that evaluation results are crafted and packaged in ways that are accessible and appealing to all. This means anticipating, planning, and budgeting for quality, accessible reflection sessions and lobbying donors to fund them. If done right, the value of these sessions will be tangible on many levels, including higher-quality evaluations.

But social accountability does not stop there. Evaluators need to do more to involve partners and communities in the design and implementation of evaluations and programs from inception. Evaluators need to make and take the time to really listen to the people and communities we work with, especially when they have critical things to say. Being truly socially accountable is a long journey but making participatory reflection sessions a part of every evaluation is a promising first step.

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References


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