ACTION RESEARCH IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY AND ISRAEL

Researchers discussing the action research project, Gaza. ©Louie Fooks/Oxfam

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INTRODUCTION

The Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel (OPTI) is one of four Oxfam country projects delivering the Within and Without the State (WWS) programme,[1] funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) from 2011 to 2016 under the Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Programme Partnership Arrangement (CHASE PPA). WWS is piloting innovative approaches to working with civil society to promote more accountable governance in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

This paper reflects Oxfam's experience of commissioning and managing action research in OPTI. Action research is a process of enquiry conducted by citizens and members of affected communities, rather than by trained researchers. Civil society in OPTI has limited space for operation. Oxfam therefore identified action research as a potentially effective model of community empowerment and an innovative way to identify opportunities for change in the 'locked in'[2] context of OPTI.

OVERVIEW

> *'This is the first time donors have asked Palestinians, "What do you want?" This is the first time we have had the opportunity to analyse deeply what our own society needs.'*
> **Eyad, action researcher, Gaza**

In 2012, Oxfam identified action research as an innovative and potentially useful way of working in OPTI.[3] Action research is a process of enquiry conducted by citizens or members of a community affected by an issue, rather than by trained, professional researchers. As such it can be empowering for citizens and communities – and reveal new information and programming opportunities.

Civil society in OPTI has limited scope for operation, hemmed in as it is by restrictions on its activities by the relevant authorities, factionalism between different groups, and rigid donor priorities. And donors and non-government organizations (NGOs) often repeat programme approaches without reflecting on the best way to really achieve change in this very difficult and locked in[4] context.

The advantage of action research is that the researchers themselves direct the process, which can enhance their skills and confidence and create more space within which they can operate. The information gathered also stays within the community and continues to promote change after the research has ended. And for the organization managing the process, it can provide an opportunity to gather new information that will help it to question its assumptions and design more effective programme interventions.

In 2012, Oxfam therefore convened three action research groups in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. Although the Israeli group did not continue with the project, the two other groups were accompanied through a process of enquiry, analysis, and writing up their findings until late 2013. The groups were then funded to take forward small development projects suggested by the research findings in early 2014.

It is difficult to quantify the impact of the action research at this stage and it cannot be measured against specific outcomes or changes in governance in the relevant contexts. But there is evidence of changes in the individuals who took part, and, through them, impacts on their wider communities.

The project helped to broaden the approaches and perspectives of the researchers and enabled them to find out new information about their own contexts, and the views of their local communities. Many researchers are now taking their new knowledge forward into their professional lives, and into their community development and human rights work. In Gaza and the West Bank, learning from the action research process enabled the research groups to train more than 20 civil society organizations

(CSOs) in participatory approaches, and support NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) to collaborate effectively around a number of initiatives.

For Oxfam, action research has provided valuable insight that can be used to inform programming on how to strengthen civil society and increase authorities' accountability to, and consultation with, the population.

BACKGROUND: DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN GAZA AND THE WEST BANK

Box 1: Development indicators – West Bank and Gaza

Population: 4 million (2012)

Human Development Index ranking: 110 (2012) [Israel is ranked 16th]

Life expectancy: 73 (2012)

Infant mortality (deaths per 1,000 live births): 20 (2010)

Under-five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births): 22 (2010)

Population with at least a secondary education: 52 per cent (2010)

Women with at least a secondary education: 48 per cent (2006–10)

Men with at least a secondary education: 56 per cent (2006–10)

Female participation in labour force: 15.1 per cent (2011)

Male participation in labour force: 66.3 per cent (2011)

Median age: 18.1 years (2010)

Poverty (percentage of people below the national poverty line): 22 per cent (2002–11)

Urban population: 75 per cent (2012)

All figures, UNDP Human Development Index

Governance and accountability

Voice and accountability: bottom 20 per cent internationally

Government effectiveness: bottom 30 per cent internationally

Control of corruption: bottom 25 per cent internationally

World Bank dataset, 2013. All figures 2012

Governance in the West Bank and Gaza

West Bank: The West Bank is divided into 'Area A', with full control by the Palestinian Authority (PA); 'Area B', with civil control under the PA working alongside Israeli military control; and 'Area C', with full Israeli military and civil control. Area C makes up 61 per cent of the West Bank and its inhabitants are among the most marginalized. The government of Israel has expanded civilian settlements in the West Bank that are illegal under international law[5] and limit development and movement of Palestinians living there.

Gaza Strip: The Gaza Strip has been under blockade from the government of Israel for more than seven years. Severe restrictions on imports and exports have crippled Gaza's people and economy. Aid dependency has grown as the private sector has shrunk. The quality and availability of essential services have also declined under the blockade, and there are severe restrictions to movement, which prevent people from travelling abroad. As in Area C, the Israeli government uses security as a justification to restrict access to up to 30 per cent of Gaza's agricultural land and most of the sea (the Access Restricted Areas, or ARAs). This has a devastating effect on farmers and fisherfolk who depend on the land and sea for a living.

WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE STATE: ACTION RESEARCH IN OPTI

> *'This is the first time participants can design and determine everything… Communities don't want restrictions from donors – they want ownership.'*
> **Abdelrahman Elassouli, Civil Society Project Officer, Oxfam, Gaza**

What is action research?

Action research engages interested participants from a variety of backgrounds to determine research questions on an issue that directly affects them; to conduct and analyse the research; and to take action on the findings. It moves away from the traditional approach based on information gathered by an external 'expert' in an extractive process, where the findings might be neither shared with nor acted upon by those directly involved.

Usually, participants in action research are not trained and are not 'traditional' researchers. This increases the space for new information to emerge from unusual sources. The approach is empowering to participants and often benefits those carrying out the research as much as those commissioning it.

Action research enables an 'emergent change' approach to project design. This means that outcomes are not pre-defined at the start of the project, but are allowed to emerge through the process – thus producing possibly unexpected and even unintended results.

The facilitation of action research does not just deliver an item or activity on an agenda and move on; the facilitator can only move on when the group has exhibited the behaviour required from the activity – for example, cohesion at the end of a discussion or agreement on what to do next. According to one definition: 'The facilitators' task is to transmit action research principles by guiding, not directing, and backstopping, not leading.'[6]

> **Action research:** *'The logic is based on the idea that when people who are part of a group, a community, an organization or a network define what needs to be known about their situation, they will generate uniquely useful knowledge. Their results will answer their concerns and will lead them to informed action… The research team identifies what its situation calls for. They ask questions, collect and analyse information, take action, ask questions about the action, and debate what they are learning with others in their society.'[7]*
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> P. Scott-Villiers, A. Scott-Villiers, and S. Wilson (2012) *Action Research: How a group of young people did it in Napak and Moroto in Karamoja, Uganda.*

Civil society in OPTI

CSOs in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel have experienced different struggles in recent years, but in all locations civil society has been weakened and now has less opportunity to raise its voice, engage with authorities, and effectively represent communities.

Before the 1993 Oslo Accords,[8] civil society actors in the Occupied Palestinian Territory were very strong and performed many service delivery functions in lieu of a functioning state government. Local, voluntary 'popular committees' covered almost every aspect of daily life, providing basic services (including education, health, food distribution, and even security) and were the main vehicle for mass mobilization at the grassroots level.[9] As part of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was created, bringing with it the hope of a functioning state that would take on the delivery of basic services to its population, taking over this role from civil society. However, the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000,[10] the subsequent rise of a Hamas *de facto* authority in Gaza, the political division between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank, and the lack of democratic elections have had a detrimental effect on state/civil society engagement in both locations. This is seen in increased restrictions on civil society, reduced accountability on the part of authorities, and competition between civil society and the state.

In Israel, some sections of civil society are under significant pressure and increasingly isolated. Government restrictions on international funding of human rights organizations have been put in place or are in the legislative pipeline. In a recent report on civil society restrictions around the world, CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, notes a 'deep concern'[11] about the effect on the right to express dissent in Israel.

While the difficulties faced by CSOs in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel are different in nature (in Israel their space to manoeuvre is shrinking, whereas in Gaza their operations have been restricted by legislation), the end result has been the same: weakened civil society voice, reduced space in which to engage with authorities, and attempts by authorities to ensure that remaining CSOs are as pro-government as possible. In both contexts, those who do not fall in line – either through self-censorship or direct government pressure – face a range of consequences, from a lack of funding to threats to their security.

In Gaza, the Israeli blockade has greatly reduced people's quality of life, leading to a situation of de-development and a protracted humanitarian situation. In such circumstances the importance of civil society's work in organizing communities and holding authorities to account has become secondary to the provision of basic services. As one community activist commented: *'People don't fight the closure of NGOs. They wail about not having enough electricity.'* Within Israel, members of the action research group explained: *'The space for a dissident point of view has shrunk so much. The government is threatening to cut off funding to Israeli civil society, but stops short of this because of how it would be perceived by Western governments.'*

It was this context, where CSOs had been weakened and had less space for operation and engagement, which prompted Oxfam to consider the action research approach as a way of empowering civil society and strengthening its connection with grassroots communities in OPTI.

The action research process

Contracting a project lead/facilitator

Action research is a complex process, and for it to work effectively a good understanding of its benefits, processes, and methodology is required. Because WWS had no previous experience of action research and wanted to ensure that the process was conducted effectively, it contracted Dr

Patta Scott-Villiers from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex in the UK, who holds a PhD in action research, to lead the project. Dr Scott-Villiers was supported by a student studying action research at IDS.

The first stage of implementation consisted of a series of discussions and workshops held over several months, which allowed Oxfam to understand the whole process. As Dr Scott-Villiers explained, action research *'may appear relaxed, but in truth it is not; it is done very carefully and it sticks to its principles like glue'*.[12]

Recruiting researchers

The next step was for Oxfam to recruit researchers by inviting representatives from civil society and affected communities in OPTI to join the process. Potential participants did not need experience of research, but did need to have a strong interest in the process. The resulting group needed to be able to work together, but be diverse enough not to represent an existing group. Oxfam wanted to hear voices and perspectives it does not normally have access to by inviting participants from groups with which it does not normally work to join the process.

Recruiting new and unusual participants has its difficulties. Oxfam is limited by its own network, so trying to find people who were sufficiently well known to be sure that they would make good researchers, yet diverse enough to add new perspectives, was hard. In practical terms, Oxfam was asking potential researchers to commit 25 days over a five-month period, on a voluntary basis covering expenses only, which inevitably limited the ability of some of those invited to participate.

In the end, the action research groups were self-selected and made up of those who could and would participate – with fewer unusual suspects than had been hoped for. In the West Bank, nine young men and women aged between 20 and 35 were recruited from local community groups in villages in which Oxfam had previously worked, while in Gaza the group was made up of eight men and women of a range of ages and backgrounds, including human rights activists and NGO workers. The Israel group began with just three members.

First meetings of the research groups

The first workshop to introduce the method and process was repeated separately for each of the three groups in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel, in July 2012. The workshops covered what makes a good research topic and question; who makes up a community; and the importance of the truth and relevance of the questions posed, which then helps others to connect with the issue. Each participant was also asked to explain their work, its meaning, and the questions that it posed for them. This process is fundamental to action research, as the research questions must belong wholeheartedly to the local researchers.

The three groups agreed upon the following research topics:
- **Gaza:** The role of CSOs in advocating on national and public opinion issues;
- **West Bank:** What are donors doing to assist civil society and what is civil society doing about the occupation?
- **Israel:** What can privileged people do to be of assistance to less privileged people in the light of social divisions in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Each group chose lines of enquiry they really cared about, generated from their own experience.

Citizens' enquiry: the research process

After the broad research questions were agreed, each group designed their own set of specific questions to use with affected communities. Questions included issues such as:

- What role can civil society take to end social and political division?
- What obstacles are there to the participation of civil society in governance?
- What tools for pressure and influence do civil society groups use and how effective are they? What is the role of civil society in trying to achieve the end of the occupation?
- What is the level of satisfaction within local communities at the performance of civil society organizations, and do these organizations meet the needs of communities and involve them in needs identification, implementation and evaluation?

Each group made an action plan of whom they were going to interview and when, and was given a small amount of money for convening and transport. The IDS team supported the researchers on ways of achieving rigour and credibility through their approach to sampling, questioning, recording and analysing information.

Both the West Bank and Gaza groups felt the need to first define what was meant by 'civil society' in order to introduce the concepts to the people they interviewed. The Gaza group concluded that civil society consisted of those 'defending issues of interest to the community or nation'. The West Bank group concluded that it was 'institutions that provide various services to the civil society in different sectors, which constitute a link between the community and the state, thus mitigating clashes between the ruling regime and its citizens'.

The West Bank and Gaza groups proceeded with their enquiries according to their action plans. Both groups used a standard qualitative research approach, interviewing a sample of community members and officials from local and provincial authorities whom they had identified as being relevant and important, using semi-structured group and individual interviews. In total, around 350 interviews took place in the West Bank and Gaza. The IDS team met with the researchers on several occasions to help them discuss their approaches and their findings.

At this stage, however, the Israeli group began to falter. Despite agreeing a common question and trying repeatedly to create a team with a purpose and plan, they struggled to form a viable research group. They entered into some important discussions with other activists in Israel, and even communicated with the West Bank research group; but no agreement could be reached and the Israeli group did not continue to be involved in the action research project.

Second meeting to analyse data, and ongoing citizens' enquiry

Continuing with two groups, a second round of workshops was held in the West Bank and Gaza in September 2012 to analyse and check the quality of findings. The research questions continued to have relevance to the researchers and the wider community, as they were felt to be investigating issues that could only be explored by those affected by the specific contexts. The IDS team continued to push the teams towards good sampling, good facilitation of group discussions, clear record-keeping, and evidence-based analysis.

However, a lack of time, researchers' other jobs, and the difficulty of travel continued to affect progress. The ability of the researchers to commit to meet regularly and reflect on the process on an ongoing basis was also limited. At this stage, the West Bank group split into two: one group in the Jordan Valley and one in Al Walaja, a village between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The questions raised remained the same, but the researchers felt that the contexts were very different.

Final analysis and report-writing workshop

After the research teams had finished gathering their data, they spent time analysing it together with the IDS team at a final analysis and report-writing workshop in Amman in February 2013. The teams

then returned home and, in the weeks that followed, attempted to put the material together into research reports.

IMPACT OF ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT AND KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

'The action research will help give us the real facts, because we are asking direct and sensitive questions. This will help our community-based organization in Gaza to explore community needs more fully… and plan our interventions more strategically.'
Talat, action researcher, Gaza

'Action research produces results. I have changed my style of working, to be more participatory.'
Najah, action researcher, Gaza

The findings of the action research project are detailed below. In this section, we evaluate the impact of the action research process, and the benefits it brought to individuals, communities and Oxfam itself.

Value to participants

The value of action research over traditional research methods was not just in the information gathered, but also in the benefits of the process to the participants themselves. Participants spoke of the changes in themselves and their work practices, their increased confidence, and the changes in their thinking that came about through taking part in the process, which provide the potential for lasting change. Although such changes may seem limited, the significance of such changes in perspective and approach cannot be under-estimated in a context as rigid as OPTI, which offers extremely limited opportunities for change and personal development.

- One of the Israeli researchers was inspired to take forward aspects of the discussions in a PhD.

- A researcher from the West Bank said that he had learned how to make more logical arguments and that his standing in the community had increased, as well as his ability to lead others.

- One university lecturer learned the value of flexibility in group learning as opposed to using a rigid curriculum only, and rethought his whole teaching approach. He commented: *'Sometimes it is hard to make a change due to the surrounding environment, but I still feel that I made changes.'* He also reported seeing the positive effects among his students and other lecturers and that he has learned how to encourage participatory learning and not to simply be just a dispenser of information.

- Another women's worker felt the action research group was a true reflection of the society she lives in and that each member had the opportunity to feel like a decision maker, able to go forward and make changes. When explaining what changes had come about from the process, she said, 'The tools we learned appealed to me (photo storytelling, for example). I am happy to look for new approaches and techniques on new research methodologies. Our society has become very traditional and introducing these new mechanisms is very important to bringing new perspectives.'

- One Gaza researcher is adopting the action research process in his consultancy work with a women's organization.

- Another female researcher commented: *'I have become more effective at working with men in my role.'*

- Another researcher explained that the process had shown him that working together could actually help them contribute to change.

Women and youth were willing participants in the research. These two groups play a key role in reducing fragility and conflict, but are often excluded and marginalized from public life. The opportunity for empowerment and engagement provided by the action research process was therefore very important. The voices and experiences of these groups added an important perspective to the analysis.

One of the benefits of action research is that researchers remain in the community and continue to benefit from the experience, taking forward the learning from it in various ways. The influence of the action research should continue beyond the lifespan of the project, and should continue to generate positive impacts over time.

Empowering civil society at community level

Addressing accountability issues from the bottom up through the action research project had the benefit of empowering men, women, and youth as citizens and increasing their understanding of the part they play in influencing policy and practice at local and state levels. The approach also allowed participants space to reflect on personal and more local examples of state-level problems, and prompted individuals and communities to address this at their own level, as well as advocating for state-level change. This had the effect of increasing the legitimacy of CSOs and their members at the local level. Bringing a broad range of people together to do the action research created new links between participants, which led to new networks and co-operation between different civil society actors represented by the researchers.

Richer analysis for Oxfam

According to the Action Research team, having those directly affected by the situation conduct the research work resulted in more insightful findings. This has allowed the voices of affected communities to more explicitly inform Oxfam's context analysis, theories of change and, in due course, programming. Although based on a relatively small sample size, the quality of the interviews and the insights they provided were found to be most valuable. Action research can be an interesting tool to help Oxfam avoid 'blind spots' when it comes to assessing its role and position in the conflict and political context. In Gaza, the action research helped Oxfam expand existing linkages within the civil society sector, by identifying new opportunities for partnerships with CSOs.

The action research process has led to the identification of issues that could be addressed better by Oxfam's programming, such as the importance of 'identity' in conflict programming and its impact on the ability to bring about change. The importance of economic development programming – an area in which Oxfam already works extensively – in increasing community resilience in fragile contexts was also stressed; people need sustainable livelihoods in order to become more active citizens and to engage with public life. Conflict and violence were also identified as factors that keep people in poverty, and prevent them from engaging with the state or holding it to account. The action research also highlighted the importance of Oxfam continuing to work at the international level to end conflicts that perpetuate poverty.

Impact on Oxfam team

Conducting action research also had a beneficial impact on those Oxfam staff involved, and on the wider team. The fact that the project was conducted in three different locations meant that the staff responsible had the opportunity to work together and share their experiences – something that is usually not possible in OPTI, where movement between Gaza and the West Bank is often restricted. The dynamic and agile project approach was also fresh and exciting for staff, and the opportunity to innovate had a positive effect on morale and team dynamics.

The process also helped the Oxfam staff directly involved to improve their programme practice. It prompted them to look at the benefits of the process over the outcome, and to be responsive to the changes in project design presented by information emerging from a changing context.

Finally, the action research allowed Oxfam staff in OPTI to directly relate to citizens in a way that is not usually possible by working through partners. This direct interaction has given the communities involved in the action research greater trust in Oxfam, and has proved to be a valuable tool for strengthening the chain of accountability between Oxfam and communities engaged in the research.

Relevance to wider fragility programming

The action research method's insistence on flexible and agile project management is particularly appropriate in fragile contexts, where the situation is dynamic, unpredictable and constantly changing. Allowing more 'process-driven' project design, rather than results-based 'outcome' design, and using an 'emergent change lens' are approaches which could enrich other development programming in fragile contexts where standard results-based management is less appropriate. The emphasis on regular reflection and learning was also very positive, allowing the team to recognize unplanned outcomes or results and respond to them.

KEY LEARNING ABOUT THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

'My advice to anyone doing a similar project would be to allow plenty of time for developing ideas, planning and implementation.'
Nivine Sandouka, Project Officer, Oxfam, West Bank

As demonstrated above, the process of action research proved to have a beneficial impact on participants and on the marginalized communities that they work with and represent, as well as on Oxfam staff. Other governance programmes working in fragile contexts, particularly where the situation appears 'locked in' and change is difficult to achieve, could consider adopting this approach.

Key learning and guidance on operating the action research process is outlined below.

- **Facilitation:** Action research is a complex, technical process. Finding someone with the appropriate training, skills and experience to lead the process may be crucial to its success. The process requires a commitment to facilitate it from beginning to end, and to provide a framework within which participants are motivated, clear about their work, and can operate freely.

- **The researchers:** The robustness of data and analysis is based on the fact that locally recruited researchers *already have understanding* of the people affected and of the subject matter, and are committed to building this understanding into effective action based on participation.

- **Timeframe:** Action research can be a slow process, which may present logistical difficulties. It takes time to recruit researchers, to build their understanding of the process, and for the researchers to conduct their enquiries. It is not always possible to deliver results to a predetermined timetable, and management and donors need to be aware of this.

- **Evaluation:** Action research is based on outcomes that are driven by process rather than content. The *content* of the outcome cannot be anticipated, so the outcome needs to be defined in terms of the *quality* of the process or the relationships created.

- **Emergent approach:** It can be hard for staff with results-based management experience to feel comfortable with a flexible and open-ended approach. Those managing the action research must

truly understand the need for flexibility before embarking on the process, and must appreciate the advantages of the approach.

- **Working with people from diverse backgrounds:** Bringing a diverse group of people together requires sensitivity, an understanding of how diverse to make the group, and time to explore with potential participants what common interests and purposes would hold them together if they participated. If participants are too diverse and dissimilar, group members are not likely to be able to work together. It also requires an understanding of personal or political risk.

- **Dominant voices:** When a single researcher is particularly strong, their opinions and direction can dominate the group. It is important to facilitate groups so that less assertive voices are also heard.

Action research presents a good methodology for interacting directly with affected communities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It provides the opportunity for those affected to input into Oxfam's political and conflict analysis, improving the quality of analysis and ensuring that it captures the issues that really concern communities.

In this case, action research was beneficial to participants and their wider communities. The process itself was valuable to those involved, leading to personal change and transformation, new understanding, empowerment of individuals as representatives of their communities or CSOs, and more informed programming for Oxfam.

ACTION RESEARCH FINDINGS

The action research groups each produced research reports summarizing their findings. The information that emerged from the process was exciting, insightful and fresh. The key findings are summarized below.

The differing approaches of civil society versus the state – identity and fragmentation

The Gaza research findings pointed to a division of roles between the state and civil society. According to participants in the research process, political parties in Gaza have instilled a strong sense of nationalism in the population, which they believe will help to resist the occupation, while segments of civil society have attempted to do the same by promoting democracy, enhancing good governance, and upholding constitutional rights. The differences between the approaches of political parties and some parts of civil society have undermined the moderate civil society agenda, which is to propose a politically and religiously moderate Palestinian identity. The same situation is mirrored in Israel, where the findings indicate that some political parties encourage an extremely nationalistic Israeli identity, while the more secular 'left-wing' parts of civil society would prefer to offer a more moderate national identity.

This issue of identity was a high priority among CSOs, the action researchers, and the communities and leaders they interviewed. However, it is not a priority shared by international organizations or donors. As CSOs rely on external funding to survive, they often acquiesce to donor priorities that take them away from work on the issue of identity, leaving it unexplored and under-resourced.

The research recommended that CSOs work more on advocacy against the 'commercialization' of civil society (in which the concerns of civil society follow donor funding, a phenomenon that is also apparent in the West Bank) and against economically divisive policies and practices by authorities and donors. It also recommended that CSOs take action to counter the divisions among themselves that have arisen as a result of political divisions.

The Gaza action research group believes that civil society cannot be the only party to promote rights and governance issues: these must also be prioritized by the state, and improved state/civil society relations and participation can lead to greater co-operation between citizens and the state – to the benefit of both.

Understanding the impact of violence and insecurity

The everyday reality of living with conflict dominates feelings of national identity and distracts citizens from focusing on other issues. When populations struggle to meet basic needs, their priority is survival and they are unable to devote time and energy to political engagement or to formulating a civil national identity. For example, the action research group reported that in Gaza, long-term unemployment, poverty and negative psychological impacts resulting from the prolonged Israeli blockade have reduced the sense of a common identity as people need to focus on providing a living for their own families. Continued violence and a persistently poor quality of life are serving to perpetuate violence and insecurity, as communities are not able to prioritize social cohesion. The research recommended that organizations in the West Bank and Gaza concerned with the promotion of human rights should work together to counter threats to their security (both as organizations and communities), which would add to building their sense of national identity.

Participation and inclusion – women and youth

According to the research findings, civil society is assessed to be better than the state at seeking the inclusion and participation of marginalized groups (such as women and youth). But even civil society is still failing to maximize their potential. Palestinian and Israeli youth, for instance, are passionate about the issue of identity and are finding social media an effective tool to stimulate this agenda.

The failure to include all groups in the design and delivery of development activities damages civil society's claim to be representative of marginalized communities and reduces its effectiveness in promoting governance and human rights, reconciling differences within Palestinian communities, and promoting a positive Palestinian identity.

The research conducted in the West Bank and Gaza suggested that both the state and civil society should emphasize the use of participatory techniques to ensure the inclusion of different groups within the community. This, in turn, could lead to better development programming. This would better connect citizens to the state and to each other, reduce distrust between civil society and the state, provide greater opportunities to address political and religious differences, and offer space to consider and critique government positions. Development actors should also improve communication around the process of development and measurements of affected communities' understanding of the work conducted.

Accountability in all directions

The research groups scrutinized the accountability of ruling authorities to their citizens, which highlighted a failure to meet the needs of citizens, resulting in a lack of mutual trust.

They also looked at the accountability of donors and international NGOs (INGOs) to the communities they are mandated to serve. They found that donors were seen to be too busy and unavailable for discussions and meetings, and often perceived as an unreachable elite that needs to be dealt with by an interlocutor such as an INGO. The chain of communication between communities and donors was viewed by respondents as too long, with too many opportunities for dilution, misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

A major criticism levelled at INGOs in all research locations was that, by following the government of Israel's directions about where to focus development instead of being led by community need, they were supporting the occupation. Members of grassroots communities interviewed suggested that INGOs should be bolder in resisting repressive policies. The conclusion of the research was that this perceived compliance with the occupation leads to an inherent inability to drive fundamental change.

For example, the head of the Al Jiftlik village council in the Jordan Valley said: 'CSOs' work remains subject to occupation-imposed conditions, which affect these CSOs' sense of initiative and their ability to make meaningful change in the Jordan Valley.' In Al-Oujah, Hiba, a young activist commented: *'Usually the policy adopted by the donor relies on… imposing projects rather than designing them through a participatory approach. What is presented by donors does not satisfy the local need and is not responsive to the challenges and burdens faced by local communities.'*

Oxfam is seen as both an elusive donor and an effective grassroots implementer – part of the donor community 'imposing projects rather than designing them through participatory approaches',[13] while at the same time providing some effective projects that contribute to local resilience and improvements.

> The research also looked at the accountability of CSOs themselves and concluded that they needed to increase their own accountability to the communities they work with, as well as facilitating and demanding accountability on the part of INGOs and donors. Some interviewees claimed that the way local CSO staff dealt with community beneficiaries was arrogant and conceited.

The findings outlined above highlight a number of key concerns that merit further exploration. Although they need to be seen in light of the relatively small sample group (300-400 people), it is also important to underline that communities in the OPTI have experienced decades of international aid and thus have had ample opportunity to assess various donors' outreach and consultation mechanisms.

Box 3: Activities following the action research

During the final phase of the project, funds were provided for the research groups to carry out actions based on the findings of their research. These actions included:

- **In Gaza**, the action research group designed an initiative to promote participatory work among CSOs, particularly to ensure the input of communities and CBOs in the design and implementation of projects. As part of the initiative, the group organized training on participatory approaches for staff representing more than 20 CSOs in Gaza.
- The **Jordan Valley** group conducted a community-led assessment of development projects. The findings of the assessment will be developed into a booklet and film, which will be presented to donors and CSOs in order to share good practice, highlight development challenges, and influence the programming of national and international NGOs and donors.
- In **Al Walaja**, the group designed an initiative to promote the involvement of CBOs in extending services to their target groups, by promoting a collective approach to the design and implementation of community initiatives under the umbrella of the village council. The initiative highlighted the importance of reaching out to various segments in the community to ensure that they are included in development activities and to strengthen existing local governance relationships.

NOTES

1   WWS is working in Yemen, Afghanistan, OPTI, and South Sudan.

2   Complexity theory takes the view that the world does not operate in linear, predictable ways, but in iterative, dynamic and systemic ways that are contingent on local and historical detail. According to Claremont Management Consultants, 'To act professionally in such a complex world requires methods that reflect this complexity. To act as if the world is measurable, predictable and stable when it is not does not make it so… And the use of such methods can create unintended consequences which themselves can work against success.' Claremont Management Consultants Ltd (2012) 'Embracing Complexity'. http://embracingcomplexity.com/claremont/scripts/page/complexity.php?gi_sn=519f23779a937 (last accessed 11 June 2014)

3   The Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel (OPTI) is one of four Oxfam country projects delivering the Within and Without the State (WWS) programme, funded by DFID from 2011 to 2016 under the Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Programme Partnership Arrangement (CHASE PPA). WWS is piloting innovative approaches to working with civil society to promote more accountable governance in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

4   Complexity theory takes the view that the world does not operate in linear, predictable ways, but in iterative, dynamic and systemic ways that are contingent on local and historical detail. According to Claremont Management Consultants, 'To act professionally in such a complex world requires methods that reflect this complexity. To act as if the world is measurable, predictable and stable when it is not does not make it so… And the use of such methods can create unintended consequences which themselves can work against success.' Claremont Management Consultants Ltd (2012) 'Embracing Complexity'. http://embracingcomplexity.com/claremont/scripts/page/complexity.php?gi_sn=519f23779a937

5   See International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention), 12 August 1949, Article 49; and T. Meron (1967) 'Legal Opinion on Civilian Settlement in the Occupied Territories', Israeli State Archives, 153.8/7921/3A.

6   P. Scott-Villiers, A. Scott-Villiers, and S. Wilson (2012) *Action Research: How a group of young people did it in Napak and Moroto in Karamoja, Uganda.*

7   *Ibid*

8   The Oslo 1 Accord, signed in 1993, was the first face-to-face agreement between the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and attempted to establish a framework that would lead to the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

9   Information about popular committees can be found in S. Abdel Shafi (2004) *Civil Society and Political Elites in Palestine and the Role of International Donors: A Palestinian View*, EuroMeSCopaper 33, http://www.euromesco.net/euromesco/media/paper33_final.pdf (last accessed 11 June 2014).

10 The Second Intifada (2000–05) was the second Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation, which led to widespread violence. The Intifada is normally considered to have ended after the February 2005 agreement by both parties to renew their commitment to the Oslo Accords.

11 T. Hodenfield and C.-M. Pegus (2013) *Global Trends on Civil Society Restrictions. Mounting Restrictions on Civil Society: The Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality*, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, http://civicus.org/images/GlobalTrendsonCivilSocietyRestrictons2013.pdf (last accessed 11 June 2014).

12 Quotes taken from interviews with West Bank village council and local authorities.

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Oxfam is an international confederation of 18 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty.