
Development in An Era of Globalization: An Interview with Raymond C. Offenheiser, President of Oxfam America

RAYMOND OFFENHEISER HAS OVER TWENTY YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE AS A FIELD PROGRAMMER, GRANTMAKER AND PROFESSIONAL MANAGER IN ASIA AND LATIN AMERICA FOR THE FORD FOUNDATION AND INTERAMERICAN FOUNDATION. IN THESE CAPACITIES HE WORKED WITH SEVERAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND SOUTH ASIA AND SUPPORTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF DYNAMIC NGOs SUCH AS THE BANGLADESH RURAL ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE. HE HAS BEEN DIRECTOR OF OXFAM AMERICA SINCE 1995. HE SPOKE WITH EDITORS OF *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* TO SHARE HIS PERSPECTIVES ON INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF AN AGENCY HISTORICALLY ENGAGED IN SOCIAL CHANGE MOVEMENTS.

FORUM: Do you think the notion of social change has remained the same over the past 20 to 30 years?

OFFENHEISER: If you look at the history of many of the countries where Oxfam has worked, there have been active social movements for much of the last century. Now, with greater degrees of interdependence in a globalizing world, the interconnections between these social movements are becoming more apparent.

Leaders of social movements are thinking more about how to work together to bring about change on a global level that will have implications on the local level. For example, on a global level, the debt issue represents a macroeconomic problem—in other words, alleviating the debt burden for a nation.

On a local level, the debt issue represents an investment in education. But it's the flip side of the same problem; by advocating for debt relief, people are advocating to free up funds for higher social sector spending. Advocates are thinking and working on the same problem, thus forming a vertical alignment of interests toward a compelling social change agenda. In the past, all these things were working in a disconnected way. There were many false starts, and many co-opted social movements. Latin America is littered with courageous reform initiatives that were eventually derailed or, in some cases, have made only moderate progress over the years.

One way of thinking about strategies for social change is to talk about them at different levels. Over the past two decades a lot of work that was being done with peasant movements was localized or country specific. Now it has become more national, regional and international. Thus, work goes on simultaneously at many levels in order to affect change and becomes more powerful when there is alignment at all of these levels.

There are more opportunities today than twenty years ago, because the linkages between actors on different levels is now richer and denser, and technology has enabled a new set of relationships to evolve that was unthinkable twenty years ago. Today, I can talk about the existence of a social infrastructure composed of both formal and informal networks that connect people and mobilize resources around specific social change agendas. These networks manifest themselves in situations such as the WTO in Seattle or around the debt. So while the work on those networks has been going on for 20 to 30 years it is only now that we're beginning to see some more meaningful payoffs made possible by technology.

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Another way of looking at this issue of social change, is that there has been a learning process over the last 30 years. If you track all the work in Chile, since the coup of 1973, up to the pursuit of Pinochet, what becomes clear is that the process of re-democratization has benefited from increasing support from the international community and is more sophisticated politically. Therefore, we saw it was possible to work outside Chile in order to affect change inside Chile.

The U.N. system held many international summits on social issues throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. There were summits on children, human rights, women and population that brought people together who had been thinking along the same lines on a set of global issues. Many of the people who cared about these issues were attending the summits routinely and began developing networks. This further advanced what you might say is the consolidation of these formal and informal networks over a 30-year period. Add the technology

layer onto this, and suddenly, instead of people writing to each other and hearing back two months later, they are literally in contact within seconds, 24 hours a day, intensifying and accelerating the whole process.

In many ways we are living in an exciting period, within the context of social change. The tools available to the social activists are the ones that previously were only available to governments. Governments have always been able to communicate like this, and businesses could always afford to buy the technology; now citizens and organizations can do the same.

FORUM: How is Oxfam America involved in these networks? What specific example can you offer to illustrate how Oxfam America is involved in this vertical integration from the local to the international?

OFFENHEISER: A number of years ago we realized that, as an organization, we needed to re-think how we operated. The traditional model for international organizations has been that Northern organizations control resources (usually money), brokering this to the poor in the South. Later, we discovered that we have multiple currencies that we were not fully utilizing.

In other words, from where we sit, our currencies are certainly still money, but they also include our ideas, access to decision-makers and networking opportunities. If these are our currencies, and we want to carry out our mission effectively, then we need to figure out how to put them to work in a way that best serves our mission and our partner organizations in various countries around the world.

In doing so, we also realized that a key success factor is how well we manage relationships—that is to say, managing not only our relationship with our partners, but actually trying to think more strategically about what other sets of associations we may want to make.

What alliances or coalitions can we participate in that will make the currencies we have more valuable and more strategically useful? In our particular case, we have joined our sister Oxfams in a transnational organization that we refer to as Oxfam International. In the simplest terms, it is a confederation of 11 organizations working in about 90 to 100 countries, with approximately 5,000 Southern partner organizations involving nearly U.S. \$400 million worth of resources.

This family of organizations is a rather large one, and is one of a handful that are trying to build similar transnational structures. In doing this, we are responding to the opportunity of globalization, in the same way that corporations do. What we hope this structure will do is pretty much what the business folks would hope. We hope it will move resources, images, ideas, people, concepts and technology efficiently and effectively to places where they are most needed. Corporations set up transnational structures to make profit, whereas we are doing it to pursue humanitarian and social change agendas.

“IT’S HARD TO ARGUE AGAINST THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION.”

In building a structure, we have tried to identify some specific areas in which we want to make that structure work for us. One area is in the advocacy arena, in which we have decided to pursue a campaign focusing on the right to basic education. This is an issue around which it is easy to convene a broad constituency. It’s hard to argue against the right to education. It has probably been the contribution that development has made that has had the greatest demonstrable impact.

At the Summit Meeting on the Rights of the Children, the U.N. system was able to get 190 countries to sign a commitment to achieve basic education for all, aiming toward basic literacy for all of the world’s children by the year 2000 initially, and now by the year 2015. This is a concept endorsed by both multilateral institutions and the general public. At the same time, it is an entry into the discussion on debt and public sector expenditure in the Third World.

Our view is that this is a window that we can provide to average citizens that will allow them to look into the world in which we work, to identify with a particular initiative—education—and then come to understand the role that debt has played in undermining the agenda of achieving education for all. I think it has been quite successful.

We have also been working on advocacy in the humanitarian arena, using the same kind of structure and the same kind of strategies. If we can work with global institutions and governments that play key roles in the international community in the pursuit of peace, then we can be more effective in achieving our humanitarian interests for saving lives. Oxfam International has worked as a family on reconstruction funding after Hurricane Mitch in Central America, and on issues pertaining to Kosovo, Sudan and Timor. We have also worked with some of the other major non-governmental families from the north (CARE, Save the Children Fund and Doctors Without Borders) in pursuing the same humanitarian goals. Working collectively we often have access to high-level decision makers and potentially have even more impact in effecting change in policies of governments reluctant to pursue these peace initiatives.

FORUM: Are there other types of relationships, such as relationships between Oxfam and USAID or Oxfam and the U.S. State Department, or Oxfam and the U.N., being built other than those you have described between non-profit organizations?

OFFENHEISER: In the case of the U.N., one of the things we did was the Education NOW campaign. With this, we went to the U.N. and said that we were delighted that they committed to education for all the world’s children by the year 2015. However, we thought that this goal had been forgotten by the international community, and that it needed to be revitalized.

We said we would take on the task of trying to revitalize the public attention to it and that we were interested in seeing whether the U.N. was going to recommit by putting forward the energy and resources that would be needed to achieve it. Then we also asked if UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank would join us in that effort by undertaking their own global action plan on how to achieve their publicly stated goals by the year 2015. We indicated that we would, for our part, be working in-country and with partners to provide the resources to get public attention focused on this issue over the next few years if they would in fact do the same. The heads of UNICEF, the World Bank and UNDP committed to working with us.

Now we have joint publications with these organizations, we have seconded some staff on occasion to work on certain studies and there has been an on-going dialogue about the relationship between social sector spending for education and the debt issue.

On a national level, we have heightened our efforts to communicate in a more direct way with the U.S. government and with the U.S. State Department on the issue of humanitarian crisis in Sudan. We joined together with our sister organizations in meeting with senior officials of the National Security Council and the State Department on that particular issue. We have done similar kinds of work on Central America and East Timor. In fact, a report we did on Central America was praised by USAID leadership for helping push forward the discussion on reconstruction finance when it was under debate in Congress. We have developed healthy relationships in various policy fora and with official bodies of the U.S. government.

In the case of the IMF and the World Bank, there has been an interesting view that has emerged over the past year, from the perspective of non-profits organizations. Under Mr. Wolfensohn's leadership there has been more opportunity for constructive dialogue with the World Bank of which the non-profit community has tried to take advantage. The spirit of that change at the World Bank has implied that it does accept many of the arguments that the non-profit community has put forward about the Bank's performance and its commitment to poverty alleviation as a core element of its mission.

Then the question becomes: "What can we do about it together?" There is an invitation to contribute concrete ideas rather than just dialogue about broad moral and philosophical issues. The challenge for the non-profit sector is whether we have the actual concrete ideas, or whether we are only prepared to engage in the moral and philosophical debate? To respond, we now have to bring new staff with new competencies in order to be able to engage these large institutions in a debate about substance, concepts and implementations—because those questions now on the table were not there in the past.

The IMF has lagged behind in trying to participate in opening itself up to a discussion about its role in the whole area of poverty alleviation. There is the

perception that the World Bank has moved toward becoming more acceptable and more transparent, while the IMF has maintained a somewhat traditional reticence to engage with non-profit organizations. There is a cleavage between the two in operational style and practice that defines the current moment and opportunity for engagement.

FORUM: Is the IMF's current style representative of the way things were with all government organizations and intergovernmental organizations in the past? Has there been a cultural change between national governments and NGOs?

OFFENHEISER: That is a complicated question. The U.S. government has been financing northern NGOs for much of the past 30 years, so their engagement with NGOs from the North is not new. What is new is the percentage of funds going to national NGOs in the South. A number of years ago, it was considered to be inefficient and ineffective to work through a large national NGO because of high transaction costs, or to work through a small national NGO because these organizations were marginal to the real debate, too radical and untrustworthy. Now there is an effort to make inclusion an active policy at the World Bank as well as in bilateral aid agencies in national governments.

Some governments have even made specific provisions. The Dutch government has made the most far-reaching provision and by law a very large percentage of their foreign aid must go through national NGOs. Germany has negotiated agreements with developing countries which require 10 percent of their foreign aid must go through national NGOs. In the past, developing country governments, as recipients of foreign aid, assumed that they would control the money. If they did not like local NGOs or civil society organizations then they didn't have to worry about that. Now developing country governments are actively engaged in conversations with donors about whether or not they are going to include these groups, how much they are going to include them, and how these organizations are going to be linked into the larger development process.

There probably comes a point in time when good development becomes defined as having accountable state institutions which cannot exist without democratic participation. What donors are trying to accomplish is to continue funding bilateral aid through developing country governments while assuring that the funding is endorsed by civic organizations that have interests in the programs.

“I THINK WE HAVE REALIZED THAT THERE ISN'T MUCH BASIS TO THE IDEA THAT ARMED STRUGGLE IS THE PATH FOR ACHIEVING RADICAL SOCIAL CHANGE TODAY.”

FORUM: What would you say to the critique that Oxfam's alliances are not really going to change the system?

OFFENHEISER: I think we have realized that there isn't much basis to the idea that armed struggle is the path for achieving radical social change today. Instead, we need to be savvy and professional, with a sound understanding of the institutions and systems that we are working to change.

In my own mind, there is a good deal of romanticism in that perspective on radicalism. Today, the perspective is more progressive. We have to consider how we can marshal the scarce resources we have in order to pursue far-reaching global and social change agendas. We want to play our role within those movements (without needing to be in control) by trying to identify opportunities for change. Meanwhile, we must keep asking ourselves whether we really have the competencies needed to bring about radical structural change.

We have to understand the incentives and policies that surround those systems and figure out ways to work both inside and outside those policy setting institutions to bring about some kind of effective social change. We also realize that the most effective social movements have had a broad base of coalition support, built on strong constituencies for change.

One of the interesting things about the debt issue is that the coalition which gathered behind the foreign aid bill initiative last September consisted of very progressive organizations, secular organizations, many church denominated organizations and a variety of conservative religious groups, politicians and celebrities. Try to imagine forming that coalition five years ago! It would have been impossible. Perhaps it worked because the objective was so highly focused. The debt case provides a very interesting case study on how social movements can operate at a global and local level by bringing together a broad spectrum of actors around a very compelling, moral, political and economic concern.

FORUM: Given this new strategy of forging alliances and marshalling resources where they are going to be most effective, what are the drawbacks of this approach? What tensions are created when doing this?

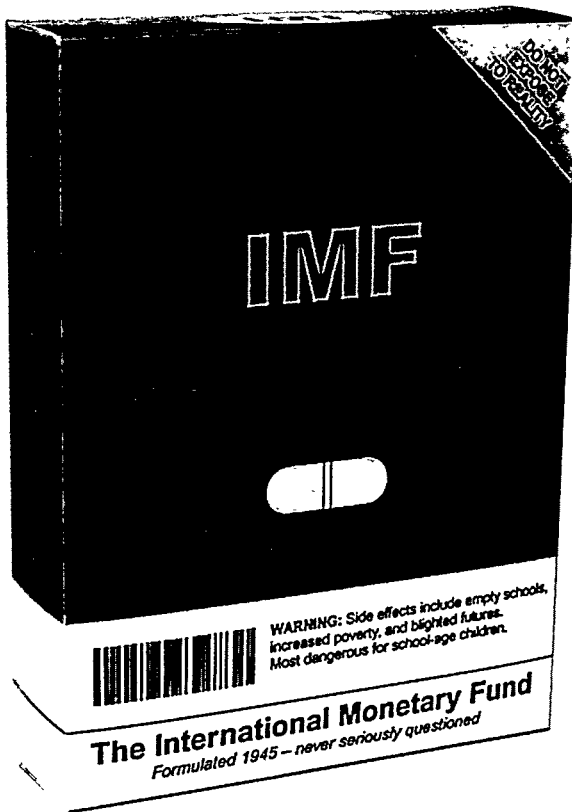
OFFENHEISER: First of all, I don't think alliance building is a new concept. The anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century was a global movement that united all sorts of organizations and church groups into coalitions and alliances. So there is nothing new there. I think what is new is the greater degree of participation with citizen groups that were probably unreachable in earlier so-called global movements. The anti-slavery movement was largely European, American and Canadian. Now, thanks to electronic communication, when we talk about a global social movement we can include people in Mali, Zimbabwe, Brazil or Ecuador. So the alliances idea is not new, but the technologies available to carry it out are different.

“THE STRUGGLE IS TO FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO ALIGN AND CREATE THE SYNERGIES THAT TURN THESE MOMENTS INTO MOVEMENTS.”

As for drawbacks, there are complex challenges to institutional autonomy when forming these new NGO transnational alliances and structures. It requires complex negotiation over governance structures and who defines the advocacy agenda. That is: “How do you align the interests of northern based organizations with the interests of southern based partners and southern based coalitions in a way that generates synergy, like the kind we saw on the debt issue?” You can’t get that on every issue. For example, northern based organizations may see a terrific opportunity to lobby their governments on an issue that is very current in their legislature, while southern organizations might be concerned about an entirely different set of issues that don’t align at all with the issue northern organizations want to work on. The struggle is to find opportunities to align and create the synergies that turn these moments into movements. Although there is a certain momentum behind our missions that permit a degree of adaptation between Oxfam and its partners, this is still difficult. We must expect tensions, conflicts, differing visions about how this should unfold, and disagreements as to what should be our priority.

FORUM: Last fall, a paid advertisement by Oxfam International ran in several important newspapers that portrayed IMF policies as bitter medicine. Can you walk us through this controversial campaign for debt relief?

OFFENHEISER: We realized that a major obstacle to achieving closure on the debt issue was the IMF. The IMF saw debt relief less as a source of funding for poverty reduction than as a pretext to get their ESAF (Enhanced Structural Adjustment Financing) funds refinanced by the donor governments. ESAF is the package of funding the IMF uses to work with governments in implementing structural adjustment, and there had been several attacks on structural adjustment that had led to threats of de-funding ESAF. Meanwhile, the IMF wanted to maintain their mandate working toward poverty alleviation. Thus, the IMF was promising to support debt reform so long as their ESAF funding would be re-financed. This was becoming a real sore point, as well as an obstacle to getting closure on the debt issue. With a widening cleavage between the IMF and the World Bank, we recognized that the next chapter in our debt relief campaign would require that we address the IMF directly regarding its concerns. So we placed ads in influential international newspapers such as the *Financial Times* and characterized the IMF policies as bitter medicine. As part of this we also created cardboard medicine boxes filled with mints we called “bitter pills” which were handed out in front of the IMF. This stunt got a lot of attention; there were



articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and a variety of other international magazines and papers. They were on every desk of every IMF employee. This little box drove them nuts. It was as much the novelty, if nothing else, that got their attention. It is a bit rough, but if you are going to get media attention focused on an issue, you have to occasionally step outside and do something like this.

“AS AN INSTITUTION, I THINK THE IMF WAS CLOBBERED BY THIS CAMPAIGN.”

The interesting story is that an Oxfam representative was invited to participate in a formal debate with senior IMF officials on the issue of debt reform and its structural adjustment programming one day after this advertisement ran. It was a rather blistering session, to put it mildly, and the moderator was unbridled in his lambasting of Oxfam for its timing of putting these candy boxes out on the street. The Oxfam representative had to think on his feet and it ended up being a good debate. As an institution, I think the IMF was clobbered by this campaign.

Perhaps this experience illustrates the need to have one group working on the inside and one group pushing on the outside. Oxfam has been accused by some organizations of being very much an insider on the debt reform debate, maybe vis-à-vis the World Bank. In the Jubilee campaign¹, there have really been two camps. The prophetic camp calls for debt relief unconditionally, immediately, with no questions asked. The second camp is the structuralist group that supports the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. This group is concerned with the more neutral politics of how to compel governments to contribute to debt relief. Now the interesting thing is that both camps exist in the Jubilee campaign; they all go to the same meetings, they all understand both strategies and

they are all part of the same movement. By the time the bill to get the U.S. banking committee to respond to the issue of debt relief was being pushed through Congress, there were actually four bills. There were two or three prophetic bills, and then there were a couple of reformist bills. This year we got \$500 million. Tomorrow, I am going to a reception in Washington to speak with Secretary Summers and the Congressional leadership on the debt relief issue and we are basically using this opportunity to tell them how much we want this year and how much we want next year. So we are not finished yet. We figure we need another \$500 million to finish the job.

FORUM: Is there a trade-off in terms of Oxfam's ability to work on the inside as opposed to what you want to do on the outside? Was the ability of Oxfam's representative to affect IMF policy lessened?

OFFENHEISER: I think the moderator of the panel felt that way, and said so. But since the IMF was a very big and very powerful institution with lots of ability to mobilize the media in support of its priorities, we were rather surprised that something as seemingly small and inconsequential as a box of sweets and an ad in the paper would have that kind of an impact. I suppose that the downside is that perhaps we won't get invited to the next panel on educational expenditure. But then there are risks to the IMF if it is not perceived as more open and responsive, in which case it will appear isolated and irrelevant, and therefore at risk of being de-funded—which is the one thing the IMF seems to fear most. So I think the risks to the IMF are as great as they are to Oxfam.

FORUM: So would you say that Oxfam is as "activist" as ever?

OFFENHEISER: I think that Oxfam is as activist as it has ever been. I think perhaps we are trying to be more strategic. We are trying to bring more content to the work on advocacy and activism. In some ways, the challenges today are somewhat different for us than they were a number of years ago. A lot of the advocacy that we have historically been involved with was around problems of authoritarian regimes. We were advocating for peace, democratic reform and civil and political rights.

"I MIGHT ARGUE THAT THIS WORK IS EVEN MORE RADICAL BECAUSE THE ECONOMIC WEALTH THAT DRIVES GLOBALIZATION COMMANDS A LOT OF POWER IN THE WORLD, SO THE STAKES ARE VERY HIGH."

Today, we are tackling issues that are related to global economic governance. Not that we have given up our concerns for political and civil rights, but our sense is that globalization has created more kinds of challenges, and therefore our work demands new skills, new vision, new interactions with institutions we have not

historically worked with, and new methodologies to work at global, regional and national levels. We have entered a whole new arena, and we are learning as we are going. I might argue that this work is even more radical because the economic wealth that drives globalization commands a lot of power in the world, so the stakes are very high. I think we are taking on a tougher set of issues and we need to prepare for that kind of engagement in different ways and behave in different ways than we have historically.

FORUM: If this is new territory, and it is more radical than before, do you have any concerns?

OFFENHEISER: I think this is the challenge for our generation. With all that is good and with all that is bad about globalization, if we cannot figure out a way to address concerns for equity, I think the model fails morally. From my point of view, this is a project for the rest of my life. I think there are probably some very compelling opportunities for the poor of the world in what globalization can offer. But there is also some great treachery as well, if in fact we don't pay attention to the environmental impact, the concentration of financial wealth and the impact of trade flows that are not in the best interest of many countries of the world. It is very big agenda and it is hard to grapple with all of its different components, and yet, I think it is the most important thing we can be doing.

FORUM: What do you think about the state of strategies for innovation in peer institutions?

OFFENHEISER: I think the big change in peer organizations is the move toward rights-based development and more concern for building institutional capacity through partnerships. This may sound immodest but the partnership model which other organizations are adopting is the same one that Oxfam has been working on for the last three decades. There is still concern for areas like public health or agriculture, but there is more of an emphasis on building institutional capacity for delivering services. At the same time, there is still a great deal of old-fashioned thinking in the system, such as welfare-based approaches to development that dominate how governments offer funding. Since many agencies financially depend on government funding, they need to maintain welfare based programs in order to guarantee their institutional existence. So, while there are some exciting innovations and new work, there is also some old-fashioned thinking and ways of doing things that continue to have political support and continue to guide priorities of our sister organizations in the field.

FORUM: What do you do at Oxfam to make sure innovation is happening throughout the organization, that people are thinking creatively and that they have the freedom to do that?

OFFENHEISER: One of the things we try to do is embrace the kinds of thinking that are coming out of centers of organizational development. We have embraced the “learning organization” as an ideal type, and have tried to understand what that might mean for us as an organization. In practical terms, we have given a lot of emphasis to the work of our field staff, seeing them as the people who are guiding innovation at the coal face, as it were, and trying to ensure that they have adequate resources, skills and competencies. The rest of the organization sees itself as supporting that key actor or innovator at the frontline. This vision of a new structure has led us to think about what we are learning on the ground, how we document it, and how we create that kind of learning architecture within an organization that can take lessons documented in the field and then adapt behavior accordingly. Otherwise, if an organization fails to incorporate what it is learning, it cannot adapt structurally or behaviorally to take on new ideas and change direction. All this may sound conceptually easy, but in fact when it comes to implementation, it is a lot harder to accomplish. We still have a lot to learn and do in order to make this as real as we would like.

FORUM: When you approach donors, what do you list as Oxfam’s successes that come out of this strategy?

OFFENHEISER: Many donors appreciate the notion of using limited resources to leverage greater impact. I find the idea of working to affect policy is becoming increasingly appealing to donors as they understand what your goals are and what you are trying to leverage. A good example is our effort to resolve the debt issue. Within the humanitarian sphere, I tell donors about how Oxfam is trying to position itself as an organization that is not a part of the general fray of confusion surrounding humanitarian relief work in the field. Instead, Oxfam specializes in water and hygiene services, as a niche. We then work with our sister organizations who have chosen their own specialized areas, such as Doctors Without Borders’ work in clinics and health, and Care International’s work in food security. Thus, in a number of recent humanitarian crises, the U.N. has automatically asked Oxfam to handle water and sanitation needs. As it turns out, donors like the idea that we are behaving in a very professional manner, and they find that Oxfam’s delivery of a life-saving service to refugees or victims of a humanitarian crisis in a predictable way is a very compelling cause to support.

FORUM: Could you tell us a little bit more about Oxfam’s advocacy work in Washington, D.C.?

OFFENHEISER: About five years ago we had only one person in D.C. We also had a few people here in Boston, designated as a policy unit, but they couldn’t do much real advocacy because they weren’t in D.C. So we made two major decisions regarding Oxfam’s advocacy work. The first decision was to endorse the concept of a large Oxfam America presence in Washington to do advocacy. The second decision was

to host the Oxfam International office in Washington. Oxfam America established a memorandum of understanding and determined the division of labor between their staff and ours. The agreement designates Oxfam America staff to work with the U.S. government, while Oxfam International works with multilateral institutions, such as coordinating on issues of debt with staff at the World Bank or IMF. Oxfam America works with U.S. representatives to the IMF, World Bank, U.S. Treasury Department, the House and Senate Banking and Appropriations Committees. Today Oxfam has about a dozen people in Washington, with four people working for Oxfam International and the rest working for Oxfam America. Much of the work of all 12 people is on fundamentally the same agenda, which is this economic governance question and finance reform issue.

Along the way, we realized it was critically important to have a very high level media capacity attached to our advocacy work. We hired a professional media specialist who had previously worked for a Congressman and had solid connections to key journalists and media outlets throughout the U.S. In London, we hired another person to handle all media outlets that connect out of London. By covering the major media outlets in the U.S. and Europe, we hope to gain a hearing for our campaigns on debt and education.

Lastly, we agreed that 50 percent of the resources of Oxfam America be devoted to the agenda of Oxfam International, and the other 50 percent be devoted to issues that we work on as Oxfam America, per se. For example, as Oxfam International, we work on the debt and education campaign, and we work on some humanitarian issues, like financing reconstruction for Central America. As Oxfam America, we have worked on Cuba, and we are developing our “extractive industries” campaign, an effort to focus on the impact of foreign gas and mining companies on the livelihoods of indigenous peoples, particularly in South America.

FORUM: Before you talked about how difficult it can be to achieve agreement on an issue from the global level to the local level. To what extent is that concern replicated within the agency? With people in Washington working on high level issues and program people in Boston working with the actual partners, is that connection not as solid as people would like?

OFFENHEISER: The issue of aligning advocacy work from the global level to the local level is a constant challenge, and is in part created by the fact that the opportunities for advocacy within the major capitals of the world and the major multilateral institutions are going to emerge in a way and at a rate that is inconsistent with priorities of civic organizations. The most important issue at any given time is determined by where you sit. The challenge is to figure out if you can connect, for example, Washington and Mali in space and time to get an agreement that an opportunity to influence policy in Washington will have an immediate return to the person sitting in a rural village in Mali. And how do you

make that happen? It's not easy. It will get easier if you have practice and enough resources to do it well, but it is a constant struggle. There will always be a new opportunity that is timely, critical and maybe highly technical, particularly in this area of global economic governance. Another dilemma is that the issue you have to work on is technically very complex, and not easy to explain to an NGO staff person in rural Mali. One might ask, do they really even have to know? Or do they need to understand the potential payoff of that opportunity for their work as an incentive for them to provide anecdotal information and data to support that campaign. Differences in perception of opportunity will always be a paradox in this work. However, we have a moral obligation to strive for the right mix of participation and consultation in setting the social change agenda.

FORUM: Where is this kind of activity going to be ten years from now? What kind of impact will you be able to have?

OFFENHEISER: Now is one of the most extraordinarily exciting moments to be doing this kind of work, because I think the tools at our disposal are going to allow us to do things that were unthinkable thirty ago. The possibilities are breathtaking, because, as advocates and activists, we have command over the most important tool for advocacy—information. Today's technology democratizes our access to information. We can move information anywhere we want and anytime we want. It is up to us to figure out how we should take advantage of these opportunities to serve our humanitarian and human rights purposes.

Where is this strategy going to be ten years from now? A lot is going to depend on how organizations reorganize themselves to build alliances, staff new kinds of competencies and avail themselves of new technology. Paradoxically, while the technology may be one of the most effective tools we have for carrying this social change agenda forward, it is also one of the most difficult things to get funded. Nobody wants to buy a computer for non-profit organizations. It just is not on anybody's agenda. Donors want to believe they they are helping poor people in the field or supporting policy work in Washington, but buying computers is not regarded as an effective way of helping an organization. In the future, maybe we will form strategic alliances with some of the emerging information technology companies that might allow us to acquire those much-needed technologies and capacities more affordably.

More concretely, in the future we might be implementing video conferencing that will enable us to meet with our staff and our partners in the field on a real-time basis. I imagine a time when we can also do more active ground truthing on certain issues, so that information promptly delivered from the field will enable us to be more effective in meetings with the World Bank or the IMF. Historically, ground truthing has been one of Oxfam's most effective tools, compared with many of the advocacy organizations in Washington that have no field

presence whatsoever. So the more technology and competencies we have, the faster we can be and the greater amount of information we can bring from the ground to the debate table. The question is How do we package that information? How do we assure that we are getting the right information to the right places at the right time?

Maybe it will also be possible for us to link our donors more directly with our partners through technology. Or to link students at the secondary or university level more directly with the world in which we work, to enable them to participate directly in the discussions we have with our partners in setting agendas. I would think, given the public education role that Oxfam imagines for itself, that this is another exciting frontier for Oxfam in terms of using technology and building global linkages to pursue a social change agenda. ■

NOTES

¹ The Jubilee campaign seeks debt relief.

