

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS:  
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT**

# OXFAM GB AND BRIDGE IN THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

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## CONTEXT

The Republic of Georgia is located in the South Caucasus. Having gained independence from the USSR in 1991, it has unresolved territorial conflicts with two breakaway territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), as well as high levels of unemployment and social inequality. In the 25 years since independence, it has received more than US\$2 billion in aid, which has been focused on humanitarian assistance for internally displaced people, poverty reduction, economic development, democracy, and civil society strengthening programs. During the communist era, Georgia lacked an independent civil society, with the first dissident human rights groups emerging in the 1980s “perestroika” period. Contemporary Georgian civil society took shape in 1994/95, after the country adopted a new constitution and entered a politically stable phase. Civil society strengthening programs and the attendant influx of development funding led – instead of citizen-led,

informal or voluntary-based groups to the mushrooming of “professional” NGOs. After the 2008 war with Russia, most bilateral aid was given directly to the government for fiscal stabilization, infrastructure, economic rehabilitation, security, and education. Considering Georgia’s unstable democratic system, ongoing human rights violations, and fragile peace, a significant amount of aid was also channelled to NGOs working on democratization, transparency, human rights, and peacebuilding.

## STORY OF TRANSITION

Oxfam began working in Georgia in 1993, providing relief and humanitarian assistance to internally displaced people affected by armed conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After 2000, Oxfam gradually transitioned to long-term development activities. During its 25 years in Georgia, Oxfam’s implemented €30 million [\$32 million] worth of

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programs amounting, mostly working through Georgian NGOs. In 2014, Oxfam HQ began working on a regional phase-out plan for the entire South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). Oxfam decision to exit from the region was informed by several factors: first, a desire to shift toward poorer regions and countries; second, a need to more efficiently allocate existing resources due to decreased donor funds for the region; and, third, the increased competency and influence of Georgian partners and staff. The Oxfam HQ team made clear it was not exiting due to its poverty reduction goals being achieved, but because of a shift in strategic priorities.

Having consulted its partners and national staff, Oxfam decided to establish spin-off organizations in Armenia and Georgia. The four-year transition period started in

2014 and featured a gradual closure of programs, with the deadline for complete phase-out set for 2018. During this period, Georgian staff established the legal basis for a spin-off called “BRIDGE – Innovation and Development,” and began developing its own governance, staffing, programmatic structures, and brand identity. Oxfam allowed national staff to use 10 percent of their funded time to develop the new entity, and hired an external consultant to advise BRIDGE on their business model. A decision was made to have both grant-funded programs and a fee-for-service advisory unit, which raises revenue through trainings and consultancies for peer organizations. In addition, Oxfam HQ purchased office space for BRIDGE, part of which can be rented out – a luxury of not having to worry about significant core costs that many Georgian NGOs do not have.

## KEY LESSONS

Establishing a spin-off organization in parallel to ongoing work can help significantly in transition success. Staff noted that if BRIDGE had been set up in the final phases of, or even after, Oxfam’s departure from the country, many staff would have lost motivation and left for other jobs. The decision to establish BRIDGE while staff were wrapping up their ongoing Oxfam – as well as allowing them to use ten percent of their funded time to do this – contributed to a seamless transition, with no gaps in service delivery to local communities or in maintaining key partnerships.

Direct involvement of dedicated and competent local staff in all aspects of decision-making is key to building ownership and buy-in. The personal commitment and leadership skills of Georgian staff who stepped up into leadership and governance roles were noted as critical to success. This helped maintain the mission-driven focus and confidence in the transition process.

Transparent transition processes are important for gaining buy-in from national staff and partners. Oxfam endeavored to make transition planning and processes as transparent as possible, engaging a cross-section of staff, partners, and, where possible, local communities impacted by the transition.

Providing customized and broad-based support can support the development of new, locally owned organizations. Oxfam’s support during and after the transition process took many forms, all of which were noted as invaluable by BRIDGE staff. This included expert legal and technical advice; continued access to Oxfam knowledge management resources; the purchasing of modern office space; and moral and experience-sharing support.

Spin-off organizations should establish a well-functioning and trusted governance structure in order to ensure accountability and oversight. The blend of a general assembly combined with an executive board was selected as the most democratic option by BRIDGE, as it mitigates against personality-driven leadership and the concentration of decision-making power in just a few individuals.