STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

CASE STUDY: OXFAM GB AND BRIDGE IN THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

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STOPPING AS SUCCESS

This case study was developed as part of Stopping As Success (SAS), implemented by a consortium consisting of Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, and Search for Common Ground, with support and funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). SAS is a collaborative learning project that aims to study the dynamics at play when ending a development program, and provide guidelines on how to ensure locally led development. In doing this, SAS looks beyond the technical aspects of an exit strategy to identify examples that demonstrate a transition toward locally led development. The case studies produced by the project highlight the past and present realities faced by international non-government organizations (INGOs), local civil society organizations (CSOs), and local NGOs, focusing in particular on how partnerships evolve during transitions or devolvement to local entities.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This case study examines the gradual transition of Oxfam out of the Republic of Georgia and the creation of a local spin-off organization, BRIDGE – Innovation and Development. While the case study focuses on Georgia, it is set within the Oxfam’s broader regional exit strategy, which has involved the closure of a number of programs in the South Caucasus, including in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Oxfam began the transition period in Georgia in 2014, with their departure fully completed in 2018. During this time, BRIDGE was established and is now a registered Georgian NGO, carrying forward the values, mission, and programmatic and advocacy legacy of Oxfam, but without any formal affiliation.

The case study examines the factors that made this transition a success, including the processes by which BRIDGE’s leadership, governance, and financial model were established. The report also describes the decision made by Oxfam and BRIDGE to continue sharing knowledge and expertise as part of a standing memorandum of understanding. The case highlights both the institutional and relational aspects of a well-managed transition, as well as the key role played by the Georgian staff who led it. It focuses primarily on
BRIDGE's experience with the transition because Oxfam’s decisions regarding the timeline of its exit from three Caucasus countries were documented byINTRAC in a separate report.²

**TYPE OF TRANSITION**

This case study is an example of a transition from an Oxfam national office in Georgia to a Georgian NGO, BRIDGE – Innovation and Development. The transition process was gradual, taking place over four years between 2014 to 2018.

In-country research took place in June–August 2018, with the majority of face-to-face key informant interviews completed during this period. Some additional interviews were conducted remotely in late 2018. In total, 20 interviews were conducted for this case study, with interviewees – which included former staff members of Oxfam and current staff at BRIDGE – chosen based on their knowledge of the transition story. The research team also held a series of conversations with various parties – including academics, government representatives, international development NGOs, and local civil society organizations – able to provide valuable insights regarding the evolution of international assistance and civil society in Georgia. CDA collaborated with the Executive Director of Caucasian House, Ivane Abramashvilli, who supported the field research and drafting of the case study. Identified by SAS early in the research process, Caucasian House is a resource organization with an interest in the SAS research findings as they relate to Georgian civil society context.

### 2. CONTEXT

The Republic of Georgia is located in the South Caucasus region, on the east coast of the Black Sea. With a population of 3.7 million people, UNDP ranks Georgia 70th out of 188³ in the Human Development Index, placing it in the category of high human development. However, a partially free democratic system, unresolved territorial conflicts, Russia’s military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, as well as high levels of unemployment, social inequality, and poverty, continue to hinder Georgia’s political and economic development.

Most prominent actors in Georgian civil society are CSOs registered as not-for-profit organizations and local development NGOs. Other non-state-actors (for example, business and professional associations, labor unions, and faith-based organizations) are also operational in Georgia. The CSOs based in the capital, Tbilisi, are frequently involved in advocacy, governance, and civic mobilization efforts, whereas the smaller NGOs in the provinces are largely focused on service provision and community development. According to a 2016 study conducted by the Europe Foundation: “… it is widely acknowledged that Georgian CSOs are aid-dependent.”⁴ The bulk of assistance to Georgia has been provided by bilateral donors and international NGOs, with the country receiving US$2 billion in foreign aid during the period 1995–2015.⁵

**EVOLUTION OF GEORGIAN CIVIL SOCIETY**

Prior to regaining independence in 1991, Georgia was part of the Soviet Union for 70 years. Communist rule was highly centralized, and the country lacked an independent civil society. During the 1980s “perestroika” period, several Georgian dissident human rights groups emerged and became influential. At the time of independence, the country faced major challenges, including social, economic, and political crises. Georgia’s nascent civil society was united in overturning the Soviet regime, but later fragmented into different factions. The post-Soviet state-building process was a time of upheaval in Georgia, contributing to extreme nationalism and several ethno-political territorial conflicts and civil wars.

In 1994/95, the country entered a politically stable phase and a new constitution was adopted. At the same time, international organizations and development agencies promoting democracy and economic development arrived in a rapid influx, bringing substantial funding for civil society strengthening. As a result, new CSOs were established, heralding a new reality for an underdeveloped country lacking democratic traditions. Instead of citizen-led, informal, or voluntary based groups, external funding led to a mushrooming of formal, “professional” NGOs and CSOs. This phenomenon, often described as the “NGO-ization of civil society,” continues today.

Gradually, a relatively small segment of the population – those who spoke foreign languages and had the
professional skills to manage organizations and communicate with the public – took control of the narrative, shaping the notion of what constitutes “civil society” in Georgia. Their publications, research findings, conferences, and public campaigns enhanced their relationships with the mass media, as well as their influence in domestic political processes.

In the early 2000s, Georgian NGOs focusing on democracy and human rights, primarily with the support of the Soros Foundation. In doing so, they created the “Enough” movement, which aimed to change the government and promote liberal political and economic policies. The movement eventually led to the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets to protest rigged election results. In 2004, the leaders of the revolution took control of top government positions. Given the recent history of civil society in Georgia, it was no surprise that 7 out of 11 new ministers were appointed from the NGO sector.

The first three years of the post-2003 revolution period saw the growth and diversification of Georgian civil society, as well as the creation of new and independent media institutions. Democratic political forces started to gain ground. In light of the Georgian government’s apparently successful fight against corruption and the criminal establishment, its social capital increased rapidly, leading to a form of post-revolution euphoria. This was accompanied by a series of radical policies and actions, which once again revived a sense of estrangement between society, the government, and CSO elites. The government’s mistakes – cracking down on a mass protest rally in Tbilisi in November 2007; attempting to control the rapidly flourishing media; rigging the snap presidential and parliamentary elections of 2008; its handling of military conflict with Russia – had disastrous consequences for Georgia’s democratic institutions, civil society, and international image.

After the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, most bilateral aid was given directly to the government and spent on fiscal stabilization, infrastructure, economic rehabilitation, security, and education. However, due to concerns over the country’s unstable democratic system, human rights violations, and fragile peace, a significant amount of international resources were also channeled to NGOs working on democratization, transparency, protection of human rights, and peacebuilding. After 2008, CSOs went through a period of renewal, mobilizing citizens and providing independent electoral observation, which – along with foreign support – ensured a peaceful democratic election in 2012.

After a pivotal regime change in 2012, Georgian civil society once again faced a new period of flux. Donors recognized the gap their shift to directly supporting the government had left, resulting in many refocusing substantial funds to advocacy and watchdog organizations. In addition, putting an end to government control of the media and human rights abuses opened up new opportunities for civil society to regain influence and develop beyond formal NGO-type organizations.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE AND ACTORS

Key informant interviews with academics, researchers, and political scientists in Tbilisi revealed that, despite having been established for more than two decades, Georgian civil society continues to be described by local observers as elitist. It is regarded as a “club” of formal, non-profit organizations, which despite weak public legitimacy continues to receive significant financial resources.
DYNAMICS IN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE AID SECTOR

Despite the progress made by Georgian civil society, it has still not learned from past mistakes. As is the case in many post-Soviet states, it has not become sufficiently inclusive or cohesive, nor does it enjoy mass public support. Most Georgians feel disengaged from the country’s social and political life and are distrustful of its political institutions and organizations. As a result, CSOs are not trying to become membership-oriented or build mass support. On the contrary, civil society remains broadly exclusive, closed off from the everyday life of the people it claims to represent. Consequently, Georgian CSOs experience a never-ending legitimacy crisis, with a recent public opinion survey revealing that just 25 percent of the population agrees that CSOs work on issues that matter to them. It is this lack of legitimacy that leads Georgian academics studying democratic transitions to criticize CSOs, accusing them of “privatizing the democracy” and becoming “new civic elites” promulgating an explicitly neoliberal ideology.

The public’s perception of CSOs working on governance and human rights is that they are project-driven, rather than focused on collective civil responsibility. An example of this would be a demonstration against domestic violence, with CSOs not recognized by the general public as representatives of women suffering domestic violence and discrimination.

Another key challenge is the perceived dishonesty and contradictions apparent in the values CSOs try to promote. Though internal decision-making is
supposedly democratic, in practice the use of these mechanisms is very limited. In addition, Georgian civil society lacks pluralism and tolerance, with a heavily politicized atmosphere leading to a “friends and foes” dichotomy.\(^9\) Little has been done regarding long-term sustainability and financial independence. According to the 2016 USAID CSO Sustainability Index, only 5 to 10 percent of Georgian CSOs enjoy relative diversity in funding, with most remaining in the “95 percent zone,” referring to the estimated portion of CSO income that comes from foreign funding.\(^10\) This has become a major problem and has resulted in CSOs (especially in rural areas) having to divert from their original goals in order to adapt to donor requirements.

According to the Sustainability Index, the landscape of donor funding has changed significantly in the last few years, affecting both Tbilisi-based and regional CSOs. According to local experts, the EU Commission – which, alongside USAID, is the largest development donor – has prioritized larger grant awards, limiting the number of CSOs receiving direct funding. Despite many EU grants having regional components that require partnerships with local CSOs, this trend is expected to further concentrate development funds in Tbilisi, at the expense of the regions. Larger Tbilisi-based CSOs, forced to compete with an increasing number of international CSOs for the same pot of foreign funding, are also under pressure. As for government funding, its scope and size is limited. Other avenues for local funding, such as individual philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, remain limited. This is due to a lack of experience regarding this type of philanthropy and private sector engagement, as well as the somewhat negative public perception of CSOs as being elitist.

In summary, civil society has played a significant role in Georgia’s social and political development since independence. Foreign support and the work of local NGOs, as well as the current emergence of informal movements, is vital for the country’s further development and state building.

3. OXFAM IN GEORGIA

The Soviet Union’s collapse and the resultant transition to a market economy meant many newly independent countries experienced a sharp economic decline. Georgia, in particular, suffered one of the worst recessions. During the period 1992–96, real national income fell by 78 percent compared to the level it stood at in 1990.\(^11\) Rising poverty, mass unemployment, and civil war resulted in several INGOs beginning operations in Georgia.

Oxfam commenced its work in Georgia in 1993, providing emergency relief, including water, sanitation, and shelter. Initially, Oxfam implemented humanitarian programs assisting internally displaced people affected by armed conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After 2000/01, though, it gradually began implementing long-term development programs related to health, livelihoods, disaster risk reduction (DRR), gender equality, economic empowerment, local democracy, governance, and social accountability.

As is the case in many other contexts, Oxfam operated through local and national implementing partners, in this case mainly Georgian NGOs. The programs were based on a rights-based development approach, specifically: the right to a sustainable livelihood; the right to basic...
services; the right to life and security; the right to be heard; and the right to an identity. Gradually Oxfam became one of the most prominent INGOs in Georgia, implementing development projects that supported the most vulnerable in the society. By 2007, it had provided healthcare to around 36,000 displaced and vulnerable people, as well as dispersing low-interest rate loans to 3,000 farmers and urban entrepreneurs who have since set up small businesses. In 2005, within the framework of its social protection project and in partnership with the Association of Young Economists of Georgia (AYEG), Oxfam successfully advocated for changes to the Georgian government’s social welfare system, which was failing to reach some of the country’s poorest people. As a result, adjustments were made to the social assistance scoring methodology, bringing an additional 34,000 families into the system.

During its 25 years in Georgia, Oxfam implemented €30 million worth [$32 million] of projects. These covered four major areas, in line with the regional Caucasus priorities it had agreed with partners: DRR; access to healthcare; empowering women; and economic justice and rural development.

**DISASTER RISK REDUCTION (DRR)**

Oxfam has worked with Georgian partners to help communities better prepare for natural disasters, such as flooding, landslides, and earthquakes. It covered more than 30 communities across the country, reducing their vulnerability to climate change through education, skills-building, and encouraging the use of renewable energy. Oxfam also worked with local authorities to improve access to water and sanitation, notably in Khulo district of the Autonomous Republic of Adjarah, where in 2005 an estimated 1,500 households benefited from a rehabilitated water supply.

**ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE**

Oxfam worked with marginalized and vulnerable children, helping them assert their rights and access health care services. The “My Rights My Voice” project aimed to improve access to health care for 20,000 children and young people displaced from conflict affected regions. The project promoted children and youth as agents of change, involving them in campaigning and awareness raising. This included establishing youth clubs enabling them to organize events and highlight health rights’ issues affecting them. Oxfam also supported the strengthening of health rights monitoring, as well as working with partners to lobbying the government and campaign for improvements to the country’s health care system.

**EMPOWERING WOMEN**

Oxfam supported women and girls as community leaders by strengthening networks and setting up development committees to help train them better understand their rights, as well as empower them to play an active role in political, social, and economic life. Oxfam also worked with public institutions, including national and local governments, on the introduction of laws, policies, and plans promoting gender sensitive governance.

**ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Georgia’s agricultural sector (which employs half the country’s workforce) remains one of the economy’s least productive sectors, meaning the population has had to rely mostly on food imports. This makes them vulnerable to global food price hikes, which leave many families struggling to feed their families. In response to this and other challenges affecting smallholder agriculture in Georgia, Oxfam and its partners – Action Against Hunger (ACF), the Rural Communities Development Agency (RCDA), and the Biological Farmers Association ELKANA – designed and implemented (with financial support from the European Union) one of the largest agricultural programs in the country. The four year project was funded by the European Neighbourhood Program for Agriculture and rural development and was implemented in 2014–18, included 45 farmer groups, selected on condition that they include at least 30 percent women in their membership.

Overall, the program aimed to reduce poverty in rural Georgia through increased agricultural productivity and enabling smallholder farmers to be more competitiveness. As part of ENPARD, Oxfam worked in 13 municipalities across five regions of Georgia, advocating for changes to the national policy and regulatory framework. This was in order to support small-scale farmers in creating an environment more conducive to the sustainable development of farmer groups and cooperatives (which were the first of their kind since the collapse of the Soviet Union).
4. MOTIVATIONS AND TRIGGERS FOR THE TRANSITION

Oxfam’s decision to transition out of Georgia and establish a spin-off organization came from its headquarters (HQ) in 2014. Oxfam envisaged a regional phase-out from the entire South Caucasus, rather than from just Georgia alone. According to former Georgian staff, the rationale behind this decision was informed by a number of factors. These included:

• Changes in the global geography of vulnerability – this prompted a gradual shift toward poorer regions and countries.

• Optimization of funds – a decrease in official development assistance to the South Caucasus meant the efficient allocation of existing resources became a priority for HQ.

• The maturity and competency of local partners – working in Georgia for 25 years has significantly contributed to the capacity development of Oxfam’s partner organizations and national staff.

According to interviewees, the rationale for Oxfam’s decision was based largely on financial rather than operational considerations. Oxfam had never encountered legal or political operational problems. Also, given Georgia remains one of the poorest and most socially unequal countries in Europe, Oxfam was clear that it was not exiting because it had achieved its poverty reduction goals.

As one of the former Oxfam Georgia staff recalled: “Funding priorities have changed on a larger scale and since Oxfam operates in more than 90 countries, there was not enough money for everyone. I don’t believe it was associated with the operational side, since we were always neutral. And if we were criticizing the government, we were always working with them in parallel to make things work... I think it was clear to HQ that problems have not gone anywhere but I believe it was still a correct decision to leave. Of course, Oxfam would have done a better job if it remained in Georgia, but they left behind a team which can do it as well.”

While initial reaction to the proposed exit from Oxfam’s long-standing partner organization was one of disappointment, the issue of their readiness to take on the poverty reduction and rights agenda was not seen as a barrier. As noted by a former Oxfam Georgia staff member: “… Oxfam was not the only donor supporting them, so there was a feeling that they could carry on independently. Of course, their organizational structure was not as strong as Oxfam’s, but their experience means a lot and it is a serious asset for local organizations to know how and in which context to operate.”

TRANSITION PROCESS

Having decided to exit the South Caucasus, Oxfam initiated consultations with local country offices. A decision was made jointly with local staff to establish spin-off organizations in Armenia and Georgia in order to continued programming, rather than leaving the region completely. In 2014, Oxfam announced a four-year long transition period and gradually started closing projects, with the deadline for the complete phase-out set for 2018. Meanwhile, the Georgia country office used 2014/15 for its preparatory work establishing the
legal basis for a spin-off organization called “BRIDGE – Innovation and Development.” The decision to establish BRIDGE in parallel with Oxfam’s regular work in Georgia, while allocating time for staff to register the new entity and determine programming priorities, was identified across all interviews as key to the successful transition. As one of BRIDGE’s founding staff members noted: “I think it was a good idea after all, because since it was a new organization, we had a chance and time to create a good image and history for it under Oxfam’s existing umbrella. It would not have been Oxfam’s branch, but a spin-off, born out of the past experience.”

According to BRIDGE’s founders, in the beginning the transition process was quite sensitive, as well as being time-consuming from a procedural perspective. In order that BRIDGE would be able to fulfill the conventional three-year operational eligibility criterion required to apply for large-scale projects, the decision was taken to register the organization in September 2015. Thus, by the time Oxfam departed from Georgia, BRIDGE would be fully operational. BRIDGE also started working on its own communication strategy and brand, creating a different website and logo from Oxfam.

As former Oxfam Georgia staff noted, the biggest and most important forms of support received from HQ were: human resources; access to Oxfam’s knowledge management system; a context-specific approach to transition; and flexibility and freedom given to the local team in order that they could drive the process without special funding being allocated. Georgian staff were officially allowed to devote 10 percent of their paid time to establishing BRIDGE, in parallel with managing Oxfam’s projects.

One staff member described the process as follows: “A big group from Oxfam HQ worked with us to assess what we were doing, whether we were doing it correctly or not and in what direction should we have gone in terms of transition. The most important factors in the process were the full involvement of Georgian staff, transparency, and enough time until the deadline… At first, we were walking a tightrope, not to put the image of BRIDGE under Oxfam’s shadow too much, but we managed to find the proper balance. We created strategic documents and went through a long process, where together with Oxfam, for two years, we did quarterly reviews of its implementation. It was very hard for us to have lots of work with Oxfam projects and work on BRIDGE at the same time, but we managed it in the end.”

In addition, to help the nascent organization to adapt to its new financial reality, an external consultant was hired in May 2015 to create a business model for BRIDGE. With the consultant’s support, BRIDGE staff decided that the organization should have an advisory unit, which would help ensure sustainability and financial stability by raising revenue through training and consultancy projects. Another important step taken by Oxfam HQ prior to its departure was the purchase of modern office space for BRIDGE, part of which could be rented out – a luxury of not having to worry about significant core costs that many Georgian NGOs do not have.

Despite Oxfam’s financial and human resource support, former Oxfam Georgia staff unanimously noted that the transition process would not have been a success had it not been for their shared enthusiasm and a strong will to preserve the philosophy and rights-based agenda Oxfam had given them. According to one of BRIDGE’s founders, their major goal was to create a “second Oxfam” in Georgia, which would have the same quality, success, and faith in the future. Without the democratic nature of the transition process, this would not have been possible.

The Georgian team took a lead role in the transition planning and implementation process, ensuring BRIDGE did not become a “one man organization”—something that is common among Caucasus non-profits, many of which are led by strong personalities known for their single-handed decision-making. Without the leadership role played by Georgian staff, the process risked being too top-down. As one staff member stated: “We introduced criteria that anybody who worked in Oxfam Georgia for more than three years were eligible to become a founder of BRIDGE… I believe that the unity of our team played a more significant role than external support. It is vital in the situations like this, that everybody has a sense of ownership.”

**PRESERVING OXFAM’S ETHOS THROUGH BRIDGE**

The final step in the transition was the signing of a partnership agreement between Oxfam and BRIDGE in September 2018. According to the agreement, Oxfam may, in case of humanitarian crisis in Georgia, partner with Bridge to deliver services or provide capacity strengthening support. The agreement does not envisage any financial support but sets out opportunities for
cooperation, exchange and mutual support in four key areas: knowledge exchange and learning, (facilitating access, use and sharing of each other’s knowledge and learning materials); advocacy and campaigning (with Bridge participating and contributing to Oxfam’s global campaigns and influencing work); humanitarian response (in which Oxfam may support Bridge through capacity strengthening, humanitarian support personnel or joint fundraising) and resource mobilization (through sharing relevant funding opportunities and contacts).

The founders of BRIDGE were staff who had worked with Oxfam’s Georgia office for at least three years, with a general assembly chosen as the main governing body of the organization in order to ensure openly democratic governance. The assembly consists of 13 people who oversee organizational strategy and planning, while everyday decisions are made by an executive board consisting of three members. The founders of BRIDGE report that while working on the transition process they studied the forms of governance and charters of various Georgian NGOs, in order to remain in line with local regulations governing CSOs. In the end, they opted for a structure similar to the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association – one of the country’s oldest and most well-established NGOs.

In terms of its objectives and scope, BRIDGE mainly continues the Oxfam’s work, with its stated mission being “… to reduce poverty in Georgia by enabling more women and men, particularly those living in rural communities including youth, to generate sustainable incomes from their work and can influence policy decisions that impact on their lives and livelihood.”16 Also, as noted in the 2016-2017 annual report: “BRIDGE accepted responsibility for effective continuance of the heritage of Oxfam, basing its activity of past success and using global and regional links of Oxfam... These approaches include a strong emphasis on the bottom up principle of policy development through capacitating, engaging and empowering local civil society actors.”

5. IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

In terms of ensuring that BRIDGE’s prospects for sustainability were strong, staff and partners unequivocally described Oxfam’s transition in Georgia as smooth, locally driven, and responsible. There were, however, also a number of challenges.

FUNDRAISING

Prior to the completion of the transition, Georgian staff held unrealistic expectations about the pace of new funding and resource mobilization. Furthermore, BRIDGE faced the immediate obstacle that, in general, international donors still prefer to fund larger INGOs over local and national organizations. Difficulties in securing initial funding led BRIDGE to downsize its staff in the aftermath of the transition. As a leader of BRIDGE described: “There were not sufficient resources for everyone, so we had to let many professional people go and it is our goal to get this strong team back as soon as possible … I would have liked to see Oxfam support us in fundraising for another year: An international organization has a different image, so it would have been better to see them engage in attracting new donors more actively.”

In terms of the present situation, the interviewee went on to say: “Our financial situation is not healthy at the moment. We were thinking that we would have had ten full time employees by now, but we only have six, and those six people include founders and board members. To cut a long story short, the fundraising process did not go as well as anticipated.” The fundraising strategy has been adapted to take into account the current eligibility requirements set by donors funding programs in Georgia.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Another unanticipated development, according to a majority of BRIDGE founders, was the brief identity crisis suffered at the inception of the organization. A one of the founders reported: “We found ourselves in a situation where we became equal with the organizations we were supporting. Suddenly we became their competitors and it was very hard to move from a donor’s position to equal one … When you are Oxfam you are being treated differently but when you are BRIDGE you acquire a totally new identity. It was shocking when you find yourself in a totally new reality.”

Considering these challenges, BRIDGE staff feel strongly about maintaining their identity by continuing to be mission driven. As the interviewee above stated: “… it was vital for us to work hard and sustain those values in BRIDGE that we inherited from Oxfam.” To ensure financial stability, BRIDGE plans to strengthen its consultancy unit and engage in income-generating activities such as agritourism. Another option is to establish a social enterprise. While
this is appealing to many on the team, there remain legal and procedural barriers to be overcome before social enterprises become viable in Georgia due to evolving understanding of what regulatory framework social enterprises will fall under.

**LOCAL PARTNERS**

In terms of sustainability, it was not easy for local organizations to lose a long-standing international partner. However, partner organizations did not depend entirely on Oxfam’s support, and were notified about the decision to phase-out from the region as soon as it was made official in 2014. As one member of BRIDGE reported: “Our partners were organizations who enjoyed diversified financial resources and were not dependent on us. Of course, it was not easy nor fun for them, but everybody knew we had a four-year-long project and it had its deadline. None of the projects were terminated during their implementation, and I think it is important.”

Another BRIDGE staff member added: “We did not raise any hopes, but BRIDGE continues support to rural cooperatives as we can and our resources allow, so they know that we did not leave them, and we are beside them.”

**POVERTY ERADICATION**

When assessing Oxfam’s work in Georgia and whether it achieved what was intended, all former staff members underlined the importance of the Georgian government’s policies regarding poverty eradication. In this regard, INGOs such as Oxfam can only play a supporting role.

While the transition process was assessed as leaving no major gaps behind, it was not fully successful in terms of meeting Oxfam’s higher-level goals prior to the exit. As a former staff member noted: “Of course, poverty is still a major issue in Georgia, and we have many more problems, but we don’t live in an ideal world. A successful exit would have been if poverty was defeated and only after that Oxfam could leave, but we are not kids anymore and we see in what environment we have to live.”

**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 10 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.

2. Ibid.


5. Among the biggest donors were the US, EU member states, Japan, China, the World Bank, and UNDP.


16. Oxfam, “Georgia.” Available: www.oxfam.org.uk/~media/Files/OGB/What%20we%20do/Countries%20we%20work%20in/New%20brand%20PDFs/georgiaNEW.ashx
