

Chair's report on Council meeting of 19 March 2010

The following people were present at the meeting:-

Trustees

John Gaventa (Chair)
Maureen Connelly
Maja Daruwala
Gareth Davies
Sandra Dawson
Andy Friend
Vanessa Godfrey
Rajv Joshi
Matthew Martin
Adebayo Olukoshi
Marjorie Scardino
Tricia Zipfel

Corporate Management and Staff

Barbara Stocking (Chief Executive)
Bob Humphreys (Finance & Information Services Director)
Jane Cotton (Human Resources Director)
Penny Lawrence (International Director)
Phil Bloomer (Campaigns & Policy Director)
Cathy Ferrier (Fundraising & Supporter Marketing Director)
David McCullough (Trading Director)
Joss Saunders (Company Secretary)
Anne Gornall (Policy and Trustees Officer)
Fran Equiza (Regional Director for Latin America)

There were no apologies. This was the first meeting of Council's annual cycle for 2009/10 and took place in Oxford.

The Chair welcomed the three new trustees who had joined Council at the 2009 AGM – Rajiv Joshi, Marjorie Scardino and Tricia Zipfel. He also welcomed the Regional Director for Latin America (Fran Equiza).

In her regular update to trustees, Barbara Stocking and members of Oxfam's management team covered a number of key areas as follows:-

Humanitarian issues

- The Haitian earthquake in January had personally affected many of Oxfam's staff in Haiti – two Oxfam GB staff had been killed and many others had lost relatives. Despite this they had continued to work under very difficult circumstances. Oxfam was involved in a major response on water and sanitation and also shelter. Plans for the next 3 to 5 years were being developed together with funds to enable some innovative work with the private sector e.g. on urban sanitation.
- Oxfam GB was also responding on the Chilean earthquake as part of the UN Water, Sanitation and Health (WASH) cluster of agencies. Its work there had achieved quite a high profile in the media.
- Plans were being developed to address the anticipated food crisis in West Africa, particularly in Niger and Chad.

Development and programme issues

Barbara Stocking talked about various existing and new areas of programme work. These ranged from a final strategy document on sustainable livelihoods (following a discussion at Council in October 2009) to some exciting partnerships with the private sector. The latter included the partnership between Oxfam and Unilever in Tanzania and Azerbaijan, where 9,000 farmers would be producing vegetables for Knorr stock cubes. This was a key development to bring smallholders into the supply chain.

Another interesting initiative was the developing work to help people to move into a more commercial environment and way of working. This included Oxfam's enterprise development programme where loans rather than grants were being offered. Considerable progress had been made with the financial sector and on crop insurance.

Campaigns

Phil Bloomer (Campaigns & Policy Director) gave details of recent public relations and media work on Haiti. There had also been an interesting investigation into the use of aid in Ethiopia 1984/5. Trustees reflected on the recent media coverage of aid and climate change. There was general endorsement for Oxfam's position during forthcoming the UK general election i.e. a clear message to politicians that aid works together with the importance of addressing the impact of climate change on poor people. In both these areas Oxfam was working with other organisations. This included the proposed 'Robin Hood tax' which had made a great impact in the digital media.

Communications

Barbara Stocking reminded trustees that the new division would be in place from the beginning of May.

Council then considered key issues for Oxfam GB with regard to the forthcoming Oxfam International Board meeting. The key agreement here was the implementation of a single management system for all the Oxfams across the world, though other important conversations were also taking place e.g. a re-examination of Oxfam International's purpose and values.

Barbara Stocking and Bob Humphreys (Finance & Information Services Director) presented the 2010/11 annual plan (i.e. the objectives and the budget). The Honorary Treasurer (Gareth Davies) advised that the plan had been presented to the Trustee Audit & Finance Group which recommended it as a sensible balance of caution and investment in driving Oxfam's work in the coming year. After some discussion, trustees approved the plan and looked forward to the strategic discussion in July which would look at some wider issues e.g. global governance and the global economic crisis.

Trustees then took part in the seventh in the series of strategic reviews agreed in 2007. This one centred on the key aim of Right to be Heard. A number of staff working in this area made contributions to the presentation and to the group discussions which followed. These were felt to be extremely informative, not least the fact that – while this work represented just 8% of programme spend by aim – it was actually integral to the whole of Oxfam's programme. Addressing voice poverty was not only important in and of itself, it was an enabling step to achieving other aims in Oxfam's right's framework. Council's commitment to this right also involved an element of downward accountability in order to ensure that the views of those with whom we work are also heard.

Building on this discussion, Fran Equiza (Regional Director for Latin America) gave a stimulating presentation on Oxfam's programme and priorities in Latin America and answered questions about some of the key issues.

Trustees and the Corporate Management Team then conducted the annual review of Council. This incorporated input from the annual appraisal session with each trustee and also 360 degree feedback on the Chair. A number of useful points were raised with regard to Council meetings, the schedule and the best use of trustees in some specific circumstances. The Chair thanked trustees for the huge investment of their time and for their input over the year.

Finally trustees considered a number of items – the third quarterly report 2009/10, feedback from the Trustee Audit & Finance Group meetings in January and March, the post implementation review of the new customer relationship management system and a change to the current authorisation procedure for programme expenditure. They also received Matthew Martin's report on his trustee trip to South Africa and Malawi, which had highlighted a number of key programme and campaigning issues.

The meeting closed with an evaluation to inform future meetings and agenda planning.

John Gaventa
Chair