

Status: Public

Chair's report on Council meeting of 31 January 2014

The following people were present at the meeting:-

Trustees

Karen Brown (Chair)
James Darcy
Maja Daruwala
Rajiv Joshi
Matthew Martin
David Pitt-Watson
Marjorie Scardino
Katy Steward
Gavin Stewart
Steve Walton
Nkoyo Toyo
Tricia Zipfel

Corporate Management and Staff

Mark Goldring (Chief Executive)
Ben Phillips (Campaigns and Policy Director)
Jane Cotton (Human Resources Director)
Andrew Horton (Trading Director)
Penny Lawrence (International Director)
Andrew Barton (Acting Supporter Marketing Director)
Sue Turrell (International Programmes Director)
Bob Humphreys (Finance & Information Services Director)
Sarah Ireland (Communications Director)
Joss Saunders (Company Secretary)
Anne Gornall (Trustees Officer)

This was the first meeting of Council's annual cycle for 2013/14.

Chief Executives Report

Mark Goldring referred trustees to his written report and a number of further updates from across the organisation:

Visit to Columbia

Ben Phillips and Penny Lawrence reflected on their recent trip to Colombia, where they had seen and experienced much to influence Oxfam's work on wealth inequality. There was also significant gender inequality and considerable violence against women. Oxfam's role in a middle income country was necessarily substantially different from more fragile states.

Central African Republic (CAR)

Following recent unrest in CAR, a small Oxfam team was being deployed to address the immense need. Oxfam Intermon would be taking on the chronic long term challenge, while Oxfam GB was working with partners to deliver more immediate assistance, for example water and sanitation, and cash distribution programmes.

Lobbying Bill

It was disappointing that the bill had been retained, but some concrete changes had been made since the discussion in the House of Lords. The spending threshold had been significantly raised, and the period in which organisations were restricted prior to an election was reduced to 7.5 months. It was not likely that there would be serious implications for Oxfam GB in the plans for the upcoming British elections. There was a concern that smaller organisations would find it hard to navigate the complex rules.

Half Yearly Report Against Corporate Objectives

Trustees are committed to scrutinise this report in depth, and in the course of the item, they identified and discussed some key elements from the biannual report. Our approach to private investment was queried by trustees. Oxfam's positioning was crucial, not least in the context of how other charities were engaging and the perception in some areas that Oxfam was not supportive of investment, which was an inaccurate characterisation of a complex issue. It was a live and developing conversation, and the proposition was still being refined – including the context of recent government statements about growth and poor people.

The balance of restricted to unrestricted funds was also discussed, and how unrestricted funds gave vital independence and enabled Oxfam to challenge governments. Some trustees felt that the current initiatives of doing less and doing it better could also bring benefits in terms of cost recovery and the reduction of overheads. Progress on plans to fundraise in South Korea was noted, along with ideas around future fundraising investment in new media.

Financial Update

A summary of the latest financial position was provided to trustees, where the degree of uncertainty was reducing as the end of the financial year approached. Risks around fundraising income would be considered at the Leadership Team's annual planning sessions in February, together with some further unknowns, such as the 2020 change programme.

Organisational Change

An update was given to trustees on the change process, and tribute was paid to staff for their conduct and ongoing work during a particularly difficult period. Trustees expressed their appreciation for the way the process had been handled – by management, staff and OJTUS.

Lift Lives for Good

The Lift Lives for Good campaign had launched on Boxing Day 2013, with encouraging results on the 'engage and inspire' aspect, but less so on the 'activate to give' results. Some changes were being made to the TV advertisements based on feedback, to sharpen the ask, and these would air in March. Trustees and Leadership team shared views on how the campaign might be improved, in order to maximise the income raised, such as more clearly establishing the need, and generating a more emotional reaction from viewers and potential donors. An ad hoc fundraising sub group was agreed on, to work with Andrew Barton and his team prior to the March advertisements were launched.

Oxfam's Identity and Culture

Council considered the fresh approach to Oxfam's overarching proposition to put women's rights at the heart of all that we do. As an organisational approach it was coherent in terms of Oxfam's reputation on gender issues, the gender mainstreaming in the programme and successful campaigns such as 'We Can'. The challenge was how to present and portray this externally.

Sarah Ireland gave further details of work on women's rights and gender justice, focussing particularly on Asia, and Aneesha Moreira (consultant) spoke about the proposition: 'Empowering Women to End Poverty. For Good.' Trustees then discussed some of the associated issues, around articulating our vision (what we say about ourselves), and the need to keep it simple, along with wider issues of gender injustice, and whether this was the right case for change to make. Overall Council welcomed the initiative, and looked forward to finding a way to emphasise both the value and the justice of Oxfam's focus on women.

Council also considered the culture aspect of the Oxfam GB change agenda. This was very much work in progress and a number of sessions with staff were taking place in February and March. There was a need for some simple propositions to which all staff could subscribe, underpinned by a more nuanced and detailed analysis. Trustees made a number of suggestions from their own experience, such as the need for strong leadership, a dynamic agenda, and a real clarity on the kind of behaviour being sought.

Oxfam International

Trustees were presented with the latest thoughts on the 2020 vision, and invited to input their thoughts. A number of work streams were looking at different operating models to take the confederation forward, from the incremental to the radical. All members of the confederation would have to learn how to be good partners, and act for the collective good, which would mean giving up power in some areas. There were some significant cost savings to be made if shared services were implemented, but a clear business model would first be necessary. Likewise, considerably more work would need to be done on knowledge sharing and innovation, to make sure it was externally focussed. Discussions would continue at the March Council, when Oxfam International proposals would be available for consideration.

Governance and Constitutional Issues

Trustees received reports on the latest activities of the following Committees:

- Trustee Audit and Finance Group (TAFG)
- Recruitment and Development Group (RADG): Trustees were updated on trustee recruitment, and asked to encourage suitably qualified people to apply.
- Programme Review Group (PRG)
- Remuneration Committee
- Governance Review: this was being conducted by Katy Steward and Monique Letourneau (the Oxfam International Treasurer from Oxfam Quebec), and would be considered by Council in March.
- Scrutiny Group: the group had reviewed the various mechanisms now in place for the Leadership Team to report to Council.

AOB

Investment Policy

Trustees explored the possibility of investing in SEIIF (small enterprise impact investing fund), to increase leverage and achieve critical mass in the fund. The Leadership Team was prepared to take a decision in the context of the reserves policy and portfolio in order to provide the necessary leverage if this was the right way forward.

The Chair advised that further details of the meeting Thursday 20 / Friday 21 March 2014 would follow in due course.

Karen Brown
Chair