

# RIGHTS RESILIENCE RESPONSE:

Tackling extreme  
vulnerability in the toughest  
and most fragile places



OXFAM



# In summary...

## THE PROBLEM:

Millions of people live in the toughest and most fragile places on earth – with unstable governance and scarcity of life essentials like clean water, food and healthcare. These are places where people face a fatal combination of drawn out conflict, and relentless devastation from the rapidly changing climate. Global shocks like COVID-19, and the cost-of-living crisis linked to the conflict in Ukraine, add fuel to the fire. And people oppressed by entrenched inequalities, like race and gender discrimination, are worst affected.

All of this combines to create a situation of extreme vulnerability for people already living in poverty, reversing decades of progress. And with this increased humanitarian need – along with insufficient funds, and outdated practices – the current international aid system is at breaking point.

## THE SOLUTION:

We believe in a radically better world where all people living in tough and fragile places are resilient. Where communities don't rely on agencies like Oxfam to simply 'provide aid'. Instead, it's the communities and organisations around them who lead the change – demanding it from their governments and leaders and requesting support from us when they need it. We'll still offer emergency response during crises, but we'll do so very differently...

**Cover image:** Kaltum, a pastoralist was forced to leave her home in Somalia after losing her animals to the worsening drought. She sought refuge in Sincaro Community where Oxfam is supporting with clean water for drinking and growing food crops.

## **OXFAM'S OFFER:**

Oxfam has a history of helping people to cope with poverty and disaster while working towards lasting change.

But for true transformation to happen, we need to take this to the next level. Throughout our work to tackle extreme vulnerability, we must prioritise addressing the root causes. To do this well, we must purposefully shift power to those best placed to lead the way.

## **WHAT WE'LL DO:**

We will work in solidarity with communities and partner organisations in these most fragile countries. This means supporting and standing with them as they simultaneously claim their **rights**, rebuild with peace and **resilience**, and lead on life-saving **response** during crises.

## **HOW WE'LL DO IT:**

This calls for a new way of working: 'Always with and never to'. We know that the communities and partners we work with have incredible resilience, knowledge, and expertise. Our support must respect and strengthen that, not replace, or overpower it. Our offer is to:

**...enable communities** to lead and drive change by offering the resources and flexibility they need to do so.

**...be a thoughtful partner** to a diverse range of organisations, led by equality and respect.

**...be a platform for change** by helping to transform the aid system to one that's centred on solidarity, supporting communities to speak out, and challenging unjust decisions made in the UK and globally.

We believe in a world where no one is left behind, power is shared fairly, and we're all held to account. So, we'll continuously reflect on what it means to be truly accountable, anti-racist, feminist, and safe – and keep building that into how we think and behave.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO:

We're all part of a global community – achieving together what would be impossible alone. Join us in a shared understanding that people want more than life-saving aid, they need active solidarity, and we must offer it. As part of this, we need your help in securing reliable and flexible funds for communities to lead the change.

Only when people have greater power over the decisions that affect their lives can we achieve more resilient and just societies. Let's stand with communities and speak out together for an end to conflict and injustice.

**This isn't just about doing the right thing. It's how we can jointly achieve a radically better world.**



Pascaline Namegabe, Oxfam Public Health Officer, demonstrates the new hand-washing stand to the displaced community in Mwaka, Democratic Republic of Congo. (2021) Photo: Arlette Bashizi/Oxfam

# In more detail...

## THE PROBLEM:

In the toughest and most fragile places, it's an intense time of danger for millions of people. In the face of extreme poverty, unaccountable governance, and inadequate basic support (like healthcare, clean water, education and other forms of social protection), communities are caught a fatal combination of drawn-out violent **conflict**, and the devastating impacts of the **climate crisis**<sup>i</sup>. In these contexts, people cannot be guaranteed even the most fundamental human rights including access to food and water – leaving them vulnerable to a wide range of threats like disease and hunger.

Recent **global shocks** add fuel to the fire, putting already strained systems and institutions to the test. For example, COVID-19 has disrupted lives and livelihoods, and pushed economic and health-care systems over the edge. The cost-of-living crisis, exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine, has led to crippling food prices in places where food is already scarce<sup>ii</sup>.

Layered onto this are deep-rooted **inequalities** – including race and gender – meaning discriminated groups are the worst affected and have the least say in the solutions.

All of this combines to create a situation of extreme vulnerability for people already facing poverty – their rights are denied, their incredible efforts to rebuild and stay resilient are fraught, and they're too often left struggling to survive. Decades of progress, including hard-won gains against extreme poverty, is being reversed. The humanitarian need has never been greater. Yet, with insufficient funds and outdated practices, the current **international aid system** is at breaking point and in urgent need of reform.

## CONFLICT

Since the Second World War, conflicts within countries and interpersonal violence has risen<sup>iii</sup>. Violent conflict has risen drastically over the last decade, deepening humanitarian need. The number of people forced to flee their homes has increased over the last decade, reaching 100 million in 2022 with the war in Ukraine and various ongoing complex emergencies<sup>iv</sup>.

Conflict is a major driver of extreme vulnerability, hunger and humanitarian need<sup>v</sup>. It causes complete loss of lives, homes, land, crops, water sources, income – all the things needed to survive, let alone thrive. In conflict-affected settings, where institutions and infrastructure aren't strong enough, there's little or no support for people to remain resilient to these threats. And governments often adopt laws and practices that limit citizens' ability to come together and communicate freely. This makes it hard for activists, communities, and organisations to collectively save lives, speak out, claim their rights, and participate in peacebuilding processes.

## CLIMATE CRISIS

Right now, we are in a dangerous era of climate change. It's causing permanent loss of life, and widespread damage to buildings – homes, schools, hospitals – as well as vital sources of food, water, and income. An average of 189 million people each year have been affected by extreme weather-related events in developing countries since 1991<sup>vi</sup>. Ultimately, increasing humanitarian need at a time when the aid system is unable to respond adequately.

In the Horn and East Africa, for example, more frequent droughts and floods make it harder for people to recover between shocks, making them more vulnerable to the next crisis<sup>vii</sup>. It's particularly devastating for farming communities who rely almost entirely on natural sources of food and water that are destroyed by extreme weather. The resulting water scarcity, land degradation hunger all too often drive violent competition for farmland, pasture, livestock, food, and water<sup>viii</sup>.

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Ahmad, a date farmer from Jordan's Occupied Palestinian Territory, has switched from diesel to solar energy for his irrigation pump (supported by the Economic and Social Development Centre and Oxfam). This has led to healthier crops, reduced fuel expenses, and more sustainable energy. (2019) Photo: Kieran Doherty/Oxfam

# In more detail...

## GLOBAL SHOCKS

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global and local economies and pushed healthcare systems over the edge. It reversed hard-won gains of progress against poverty and deepened existing inequalities. It caused worsening inflation, rising prices, reduced trade, fewer jobs and an unprecedented rise in poverty levels<sup>ix</sup>.

Meanwhile, the conflict in Ukraine and its global consequences, such as crippling cost of living and energy prices, is further demonstrating how fragile and interconnected our world is<sup>x</sup>. The impact on cost-of-living worldwide is making it even harder for people in extremely vulnerable situations to survive.

## ENTRENCHED INEQUALITIES

The world is full of deep-rooted inequalities – including gender, racial and economic – that have been exacerbated and put under a spotlight in recent years<sup>xi</sup>. Marginalised groups – racial or ethnic minorities, refugees, women, migrants, LGBTQIA+ – are least protected by officials, institutions, and laws than any other. They're the worst affected when conflict and extreme weather strikes, and still too often the last to be considered in the solutions, if at all.

### FOR EXAMPLE, THE DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON WOMEN:

In places where conflict is a threat and social protection is weak, women are more likely to be affected by sexual and gender-based violence and recruitment forced into trafficking, sexual slavery and forced marriage. With social expectations mostly on women to look after the family and the home, the additional care responsibilities resulting from war, destructive weather and COVID-19 are more often on their shoulders. Women are more likely to be the ones to go hungry when food is short, to fall back on unsafe work when harvests fail, and to walk further to collect water when it's scarce, often at risk to their own safety. And since, in low-income countries, most women who are in paid work tend to have informal jobs like domestic cleaners and street vendors, they're more likely to lose their income when these big threats take

hold as there's no formal way to support them in upholding their rights.

These global inequalities routinely deny people their rights – with harmful and oppressive systems that deny them the opportunities and resources available to others. Marginalised groups are often excluded and prevented from participating fully in social, economic, and political life. This is a barrier to creating lasting and peaceful solutions that account for everyone's needs and experiences. As a result, people's situation of vulnerability is exacerbated. The trauma and exclusion can also lead to violence being seen as the only, or best, means of claiming one's rights. This is especially true when support from officials, institutions and laws is perceived to be inaccessible, biased, or corrupt.



**Above images:** Razia Sultana is an activist, educator, and lawyer. Among many things, she's written reports about sexual violence by security forces against Rohingya women and girls. Razia leads a women's rights organisation in Bangladesh called RW Welfare Society, who Oxfam supports as a partner and leader of humanitarian response in the area. (2021) Fabeha Monir/Oxfam.

# In more detail...

## INTERNATIONAL AID: A SYSTEM AT BREAKING POINT

These threats have reversed decades of progress against extreme poverty. Within this context of increased humanitarian need, the current international aid system is at breaking point<sup>xii</sup>. By 'international aid system', we mean UN agencies, donors, and international organisations like Oxfam. The challenges are multiple, including:

- Many political narratives undermining the value of aid and trust in the sector, contributing to funding cuts by wealthy nations (including aid cuts the UK)<sup>xiii</sup>.
- When money is available, funders often set priorities and restrictions on how it is spent – making it inflexible for local communities and organisations to lead the way.
- Responses to humanitarian needs – including those offered by Oxfam – don't always coherently address the root causes or invest in long term community-owned solutions.
- Too little collaboration and coordination between local and international agencies – often with international organisations competing for resources local actors don't have access to.
- Local organisations have often been undermined or made invisible by the international aid sector, with their knowledge and action being underfunded or dismissed.

Most importantly, there's an inherent imbalance of power between the global North (rich governments and international aid agencies) and the global South (the communities we wish to serve). The power imbalance drives communities, their organisations, and governments to heavily depend on foreign support – which is becoming increasingly unreliable. Oxfam is an organisation based in the global North, and we recognise our contribution to the problem. We acknowledge our role in helping to radically transform the aid system.

**Right hand image:** Oxfam KEDV is a women's organisation who've worked with Syrian refugee and other communities in Türkiye for years. A team member's seen here responding to the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes. They're supporting nearly 2 million people to rebuild their lives. (2023) Tineke D'haese/Oxfam.



# It doesn't have to be this way...

## THE SOLUTION:

We believe that poverty and extreme vulnerability aren't inevitable. We believe in just and more resilient societies – with strong institutions and resources that enable everyone to thrive, realise their rights, and help build lasting peace.

This calls for a new way of thinking and working that's inclusive and people centred – and that addresses how power is held and used. Ensuring that communities don't rely on agencies like Oxfam to simply 'provide aid'. Instead, they're the ones who lead the change, demanding it from their governments and leaders and requesting support from us when they need it. There will still be times when Oxfam and other international agencies need to be active in responding to crises. But the way we do it needs to be different.

This will enable communities to have the power, institutions, and resources to simultaneously:

- stand up for their **rights**
- rebuild with more **resilience**
- lead on life-saving **response** during crises

**THIS CALLS FOR A NEW WAY OF THINKING AND WORKING THAT'S INCLUSIVE AND PEOPLE CENTRED – AND THAT ADDRESSES HOW POWER IS HELD AND USED.**

Oxfam has a history of helping people cope with poverty and disaster while tackling the underlying causes. This meant delivering short term (emergency response), medium term (development work), and long term (campaigning for change) solutions. And we have a history of working with communities and partner organisations around the world. But for true transformation to happen, we need to take this to the next level.

The three areas of rights, resilience and response must be addressed holistically if we're to achieve radical lasting change<sup>xiv</sup>. And for this to be truly effective, we must step back and embrace a new way of working that shifts power to the communities best placed to lead the way. This shift also means creating synergies and common goals across short-term emergency response programmes and longer-term social change processes in development, as well as enhancing opportunities for peace so that individuals can enjoy the full spectrum of human rights. This is known across the sector as the 'triple nexus approach'<sup>xv</sup>.

Communities and organisations in tough and fragile places are change-makers. They proactively seek peaceful lasting solutions and hold the knowledge and expertise to lead the way. They must be the ones with the power to make decisions, use their voices, decide how money is spent, and ultimately shape the work that affects their lives.

## WHAT WE'LL DO

Oxfam's offer is to work in solidarity with communities and their local organisations. We will holistically focus on standing up for **rights** while rebuilding with peace and **resilience** and offering life-saving **response** (when it is needed or requested).

This means supporting communities...

- to prepare for, survive, and rebuild after crises and conflict so people are less vulnerable to future threats.
- to hold governments and other power holders to account and demand their rights (including the right to basic support like food and clean water).
- to build and maintain movements for social justice, strengthening the ability of civil society groups to push for lasting change and peaceful solutions.
- by raising funds and challenging unjust decisions made in the UK (such as the double standard of the UK government selling weapons to warring parties in Yemen while offering humanitarian aid).
- with resources that they request – such as money, equipment, training, access to decision-makers, clean water in an emergency, advice to protect them from physical and emotional harm.

**And we won't be afraid to take a bold stance calling out the practices and injustices that stop resources from getting to people when they need it most.**



## HOW WE'LL DO IT

This calls for a new way of working: 'Always with and never to'. We know that the communities we work with, and the organisations around them, have incredible resilience, knowledge, and expertise. Our support needs to respect and strengthen that, not replace or overpower it as it has in the past.

Partners and staff around the world have helped us define how to deliver our offer. We will:

**...enable** communities, staff and partners to lead and drive change by investing in local expertise, and shifting power to them – time, money, decision-making, training, and influence. As part of this, we'll help demonstrate the benefit of unrestricted funding i.e. communities having more reliable access to the resources they need, and local leadership having the flexibility to decide how the money is best used.

**...partner** in solidarity with a diverse range of organisations in the countries where we work – from non-profit organisations to community activist groups – anchored in equality, trust, respect, and mutual accountability.

**...be a platform** for change by helping transform the aid system to one that's centred on solidarity and shifting power. We'll co-create forums for discussion and learning. We'll jointly call for adequate funding so communities can anticipate and prevent loss and damage when disasters hit. We'll support others to speak out and be heard by decision makers, giving space to others' voices and hard work. And we'll invest in joint campaigns, speaking out loudly together to challenge drivers of injustice that are rooted in the global North.

### SAFE, ANTI-RACIST, FEMINIST AND ACCOUNTABLE

We believe in a world where no one is left behind, power is shared fairly, and we are all held to account. This will never be achieved until we are a truly safe, anti-racist, feminist, and accountable organisation.

So, we'll keep reflecting on what this means and adapting how we think and behave. We'll be careful to include the most marginalised and excluded groups – listening and learning from people who're oppressed or silenced. We'll be sensitive to the daily life-threatening challenges that our partners and staff encounter in these difficult and dangerous places, prioritising their safety. And we'll support them to make decisions on how resources are used, and we'll bear the risk where needed – embracing mutual accountability.

### HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S WORKING...

There's a long path ahead – this is about changing an entire system. We'll know we're on our way when, by 2025, we see:

**Distinct shifts in our ways of working.** Local leadership and expertise are prioritised – partners, allies and colleagues in fragile settings drive decision-making, allocation of funds, and delivery of our work.

**Accessible climate finance.** Communities facing extreme vulnerability have money to cope with the loss (of life, land, culture, income) and damage (to crops, homes, food supplies) from the climate crisis.

**Progress towards peace.** Communities and our partners, especially women's organisations, are driving well-funded peacebuilding efforts that are positive, equal, inclusive, feminist and sustained.

**Shifts in the aid system.** Rich nations – and those in fragile settings – are investing in inclusive governance, with community-led initiatives that prepare for, respond to, and rebuild from crises.

**A stronger global network.** A network of people and organisations worldwide that is more powerful and influential, and all voices are being heard. We're supporting each other, monitoring progress, sharing learning and insights, and creating impact.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO...

We're all part of a global community, achieving together what's impossible alone. Let's act together with a shared understanding that people facing extreme vulnerability need more than access to essentials like water and food. This 'life-saving' support is still needed, but let's offer it differently.

Let's stand in solidarity to enable a more respectful and impactful way of making change happen. As part of this, we need your voice and influence to speak out together against injustice. And we need your help in securing reliable and flexible funds for communities to drive this change forward. Only when they have greater power over the decisions that affect their lives can we achieve more resilient and just societies.

**This isn't just about doing the right thing. This is how we will jointly achieve lasting and profound change.**

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**Right hand image:** Monther Alattar, an Oxfam engineer, stands next to one of three solar panels Oxfam installed to power a water supply system in Almusaimir, Yemen. (2020) Photo: Pablo Tosco / Oxfam

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