FAMINE: DIDN’T WE SAY NEVER AGAIN?

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
> SEX ED IN SENEGAL
> PINEAPPLES AND TAMARILLOS
> REFUGEES WELCOME
How Will You Leave Your Mark on the Future?

Create a legacy. If you would like to deepen your support of Oxfam America and increase your impact, consider making a planned gift. Including a bequest to Oxfam in your will or trust, or setting up a charitable gift annuity are easy and flexible ways to help create long-term solutions to end poverty, hunger, and injustice.

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DEAR FRIENDS,

CloseUp is returning to print. After careful consideration, Oxfam shifted to publishing our magazine digitally a year ago. We discovered over the course of the year, however, that the majority of you strongly favored a print version. Because CloseUp is a tool for helping you feel connected to what Oxfam is doing to fight poverty and injustice, getting it to you in the form you want is crucial. You spoke and we listened.

Now, more than ever, it’s essential that each of us finds a way to stay engaged: famine has struck parts of South Sudan, and starvation is threatening tens of millions of people across Africa and the southern Arabian Peninsula. What’s so disturbing about this crisis is that it’s largely human-made, a consequence of ongoing conflicts, the deadly disruptions they impose on people’s lives, and our collective failure to respond fast enough.

You’ve undoubtedly heard about this unfolding tragedy in the news. In the pages ahead, we’ll give you an overview and provide a link where you can find out more about the critical steps we, together with our local partners, are taking to help people. We know that if we act quickly we can prevent further suffering.

But in this digital age, it’s easy to get distracted. There are so many urgent needs in the world, all demanding our attention, all flooding our inboxes. How do we focus—so we can act? I’m reminded of a message I received from a supporter a short while ago. He said he liked to keep important materials handy so he could read them when he had a chance. For some of us that means bookmarking them electronically; for others it means stashing stapled pages in a briefcase.

In once again bringing this magazine to you in print, our hope is that it will serve as a tangible reminder of the many challenges humanity faces—and of all that you are doing to help people help themselves.

Sincerely,

Coco McCabe
Editor, Oxfam CloseUp

EDITOR’S NOTE: The hunger crisis we are covering in this issue of CloseUp has begun to shift thanks to the dedicated work of the humanitarian community. As of press time, however, people in parts of South Sudan are still suffering from famine. Please visit our website—oxfamamerica.org—for late-breaking updates on this emergency.

COVER: This woman arrived in Nyal, in Panyijar County, South Sudan, to register for a food distribution. Emergency hunger levels have been declared in the county. Bruno Bierrenbach Feder/Oxfam

We welcome your feedback. Please direct letters to editor@oxfamamerica.org.
In 2011, when famine struck Somalia, a shocked world said “never again.” Six years later, famine is back—tormenting 100,000 people in parts of South Sudan while countless others across Africa and the southern Arabian Peninsula endure hunger levels bordering on starvation.

A massive hunger crisis snaring Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan is now threatening the lives of 30 million people, a staggering number in a modern age when we know our planet can produce enough food for everyone.

How can so many people be facing such catastrophe?

Mostly, it’s because of us: this crisis is largely human-made, a consequence of conflict, poor governance, and a painfully slow resolve on the part of world governments to rally a robust response.

“Famine does not arrive suddenly or unexpectedly,” said Nigel Timmins, Oxfam’s humanitarian director. “It comes after months of procrastination and ignored warnings. It is a slow, agonizing process, driven by callous national politics and international indifference.”

Drought and climate change also have a hand in people’s suffering, particularly in places like Somalia as well as Kenya and Ethiopia, where some herders say they have not seen rain in two years. In those parched places, some herding families have watched nearly all their animals die, and they fear what may come next.

“We are in a dangerous situation—even people,” said a man named Mohammed who is now living with his family in a temporary settlement where food has been distributed in the Somali region of Ethiopia. Out of a herd of 400 sheep and goats, he has only 15 left. “If the drought continues like this, people will die.”

AT A FOOD DISTRIBUTION—A HUSH FALLS

Aid groups rely on a set of strict definitions to classify the stages of a hunger crisis. But in communities where the situation has already become extreme, technical descriptions don’t begin to tell the whole story—the human story. At food distributions, like the one Oxfam press officer Lauren Hartnett participated
in recently, abstracts can become achingly clear. Here is her account from Nyal, South Sudan:

One elderly man I met, Majok Noan Mayian, had just arrived in Nyal the day before the food distribution, and could barely walk, needing support from family members and walking sticks. He traveled to Nyal with his neighbors, who had family in Nyal who have opened their very small home to him and his seven additional family members. As Majok was assisted into the clearing, a hush fell over the crowd that had gathered to receive food. Even those who were clearly in immediate need were taken aback by how gaunt and frail they were, allowing them to pass through to the front of the line to register.

He and the others of his generation had to be carried in a plastic tarp floating in the swamps for several days to reach Nyal. Just like too many others, his life was uprooted when his home was burned down, his cattle and other possessions stolen, and he was forced to run for his life. They didn’t have much because it has been too dangerous to farm recently, but the loss is still devastating.

And even as he struggled to sit up to speak, he talked about how others were “too sick and weak”—and not able to make the trip that he had made to Nyal. He told me, “What we have left behind is a horror. What we have in Mayendit is gone—houses are burned, our cattle [are] taken. And then living in the islands there, you don’t know if you will live to see the next day.”

FAST ACTION CAN SAVE LIVES

The situation for millions of families is dire, but if we act now we can prevent the worst from happening. The UN said it needs $4.9 billion by the end of June for food, nutrition, health, and clean water in order to tackle the crises in South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and Nigeria. Oxfam has been calling on Congress to fund a robust international affairs budget to help meet these extreme needs. And we are urging governments and international partners to work together to find political solutions to the causes of conflict and insecurity.

In the short term, together with our local partners we are striving to ensure families not only have clean water but access to decent sanitation services and programs that promote good hygiene. During severe food crises, clean water is vital in preventing the spread of diseases that can quickly take the lives of people already weak from hunger.

In addition, we are helping people get access to food by distributing it directly, by providing cash so families can buy what they need in local markets, and by helping people produce their own crops.

SNAPSHOT OF THE UNFOLDING CRISIS

In three out of four of these countries, conflict is the main driver of the suffering families are now enduring.

SOUTH SUDAN: A brutal civil war has left thousands of people dead, resulted in villages burnt to ashes, and forced the displacement of great numbers of people. Five million are now estimated to need humanitarian assistance. Acute malnutrition remains a major public health emergency.

YEMEN: Following two years of conflict, the country’s economy is shattered, food prices have skyrocketed, and more than seven million people don’t know where they will get their next meal.

SOMALIA: The famine in 2011 claimed the lives of at least 260,000 people, half of them children. Now, 2.5 million people are facing crisis levels of hunger, and since November 2016, drought has driven more than 600,000 people from their homes.

NIGERIA: Eight years of fighting between the government and Boko Haram has forced many families to flee: 4.7 million people are facing crisis. And though famine has not been declared, 44,000 people may be living in famine-like conditions.

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A CLOSER LOOK

To learn more about our response and what you can do to help, visit oxfamamerica.org/closeup-famine.

OPPOSITE: In Nigeria, women stand at the entrance to a camp for more than 30,000 people who have fled conflict between Boko Haram and the military. The conflict has spread to Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, forcing millions of people to leave their homes and confront a new danger: hunger. Pablo Tosco/Oxfam Intermon
On a cool winter day in Dakar, Aisha is in a classroom at her high school. The school is called Lycée Yoff Village, and it is right on the beach—but separated from it by a high wall. You can’t see the ocean; but everywhere in the school you can hear the surf crashing on the beach, invisible but powerful, like thunder in the distance, but it just never stops.

Aisha is talking about sex and sexuality. She’s with her science teacher, and as part of his class and a special club for students she is learning about … life. She says young girls like her (she is 16) and her friends have a lot of questions. “They want to know,” she says in a matter-of-fact manner, “why their bodies are changing during puberty.”

“And sex,” she says. “What does sex feel like?” She and her classmates are also asking, and learning, about sexually transmitted diseases as well: “What is AIDS, how is it transmitted, how to prevent it.”

It’s all important knowledge for a young woman in a modern city. Outside these school walls, there’s not a lot of information about these matters for young people who need it the most. Aisha says that in her family, “these subjects are taboo.” She can’t discuss them with her mother, or anyone else. It’s just out of the question.

Her teacher is a young man named Mohamed Aly Sonko. His job is to teach anatomy, but he says that’s not enough. Beyond explaining menstrual cycles and how to prevent pregnancy and STDs, he says schools need to do more. “When students learn lessons about sexuality, it’s different applying it in their real life,” he says. “You can’t just get good grades; you have to navigate life in society.”

YOUTH IN SENEGAL

About half of Senegal’s 13.7 million people are younger than 20, says Aminata Traoré Seck, a public health expert who works at the Ministry of Health in Dakar. She says the ministry estimates there are more than three million students in primary and secondary schools in Senegal. And, she says, these students now need more than training around hygiene (washing their hands after using the toilet), a focus of the ministry up to the 1990s. Since then, she says, ministry staff started noticing that “children are becoming sexually active at a younger and younger age.” The ministry established “EVF clubs” where students can meet to discuss sex education. (EVF is short for Education Vie Familiale, or family life education.) “These clubs did not always cover all the questions students had about HIV and AIDS,” Seck says. “But it also became clear to us that these are not the only questions children have. They are concerned about other things as well.”

“We are a conservative country,” Seck says. “Most families and schools are not properly prepared to discuss or teach anything about sex. And youth don’t know where to get information. We wanted to look at ways to create a curriculum that addresses these gaps in information.”

Starting in 2013, Oxfam and eight other organizations in Senegal began the Connecting 4 Life (C4L) campaign to help young people learn about sex and sexuality in ways that also help them discuss it with each other and their families.
It’s part of Oxfam’s work to help promote better respect for women’s rights in Senegal, and in this case, that effort started as a way to help young people, particularly young women, avoid HIV and AIDS. Oxfam has prioritized reducing the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection in numerous countries, both because poor females are more likely to be exposed to HIV due to their lower social status, and because infection can push them further into poverty.

But C4L is also promoting the idea that young people have the right to basic social services, including education about sexual reproductive health and life skills that will help them navigate the wider world beyond the walls of schools like Lycée Yoff Village. In addition to giving young people the information they need to understand their bodies and avoid sexually transmitted diseases, C4L also aims to mobilize a generation of health advocates who can push their government to meet its obligations to provide basic health services and teach young people what they need to know to lead healthy lives. C4L has reached more than 34,000 students (20,000 of them girls) in 120 schools across the country.

C4L created a website in Senegal called Click Info Ado (clickinfoado.sn) that has animated stories about the things young people in Senegal confront every day: forced marriages of young girls, domestic violence (and violence in schools), the rights of young women in conservative families and societies, pregnancy prevention, and all manner of difficult interpersonal relationships.

WHAT’S WRONG?
In many Senegalese households, talking frankly with young people about sex is taboo, leaving them defenseless when they confront challenging issues such as sexually transmitted diseases and early marriage.

WHAT’S OXFAM DOING?
Through a campaign using modern tools—text messages—Oxfam is working with partners to ensure that young people have access to the information they need to make smart decisions about their bodies and their futures.

Right the Wrong
One of the more dramatic pieces is that of a young woman named Thiakass, who learns she is HIV-positive and gathers up the courage to share her status with an old (and particularly unsympathetic) boyfriend. “It’s a really good story; the students were really impressed by it,” says Sonko, the teacher at Lycée Yoff Village. “I really like programs that put issues in a real context that the students live in here in Yoff. ... That’s their reality. So it’s important that C4L recognizes that the official lesson plan from the Ministry of Education may not translate well into their real lives outside school.”

Mamadou Thioye Diene, a 19-year-old junior at Lycée Yoff Village, agrees that the most interesting discussions students have at the EVF club and in classes with Sonko revolve around how to talk about these difficult subjects. He cites a story on Click Info Ado of a young man about to enter into marriage with an underage bride. He knows he is HIV-positive and is struggling with whether, and how, to relate this information to his fiancée.

“Before marriage, you can’t hide this type of information,” Diene says. “Couples need to go to the hospital together and get tested. And you can’t have secrets like that if you have a girlfriend.”

His other advice: “Marriage forcé,” he says, “c’est pas bon.” Forced marriage, it’s not good.

**TEXT ADVICE**

Connecting 4 Life has another 21st-century approach to providing information for young people: text messages. The program has four “telecounselors” (three women and a man) plus a manager, who respond to messages. While the program was set up to help young people with questions about HIV and AIDS, and about where to get help for cases of domestic or sexual violence, most of the questions are more routine. “More frequently we get questions about menstruation,” says manager Aristote Mpombo, 39, who works for Enda Graf Sahel, a nongovernmental organization that is one of the members of the C4L coalition in Senegal. “We get a lot of other questions about sexuality generally, interpersonal relations questions, and how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases,” he says.

A very small percentage of questions are more urgent, he adds. “The most serious questions we get are about rape, or forced marriages. ... There’s not too many of those, about 2 percent of the questions. But rape gets our attention quickly,” Mpombo says. “We provide two or three options depending on the case. If it’s a question of just requesting information, we refer them to medical or psychological help in their area and provide a phone number and address where they can get the appropriate kind of help.”

A text message is an imperfect form of communication for such sensitive matters, says Mamadou Kobay, 46, who works part time as a telecounselor for C4L. He has years of training people in human rights and development matters, particularly as they relate to the rights of women and girls. Since he started working as a...
telecounselor in 2011, he estimates he has answered 80,000 questions.

“We’re limited to just a few characters, so we have to send several messages,” Kobar explains. He says he tries to ensure his messages do not reflect his personal opinions, but rather “explain consequences and possibilities and let people decide on their own. We need to allow the youth to take responsibility themselves, and I try to advise them about how they need to understand consequences and make their own decisions.”

His other frustration is that the anonymous nature of the messages does not allow anyone to follow up on the particularly difficult cases. “One young girl wrote that her uncle is molesting her, and she felt she could not say anything because he’s paying her school fees. I gave her a phone number to call, but I always wonder: Did she ever call?”

**BETTER LIFE SKILLS**

Carmen Padonou is a program manager for One World, a key member of the C4L coalition in Senegal. She says C4L is active in seven countries, and that the effort in Senegal is focused on getting better curriculum about sexual reproductive health into the high schools. C4L is advocating for the Ministry of Health to lead on helping young people understand their rights to live free from sexual violence, she says. She adds that “girls need to learn that it only takes one time to get pregnant or get HIV. ... That’s what I want young girls to understand so they can protect their human rights.”

She acknowledges that in a conservative country, “This leaves people uneasy.” They worry that teaching young people about sexual reproductive health will just encourage them to become more sexually active.

So she asks Aisha, the 16-year-old student at Lycée Yoff Village this: If young girls are discussing sex in EVF club meetings, people can accuse them of being sexually active and they can get a bad reputation. Is this a problem?

Aisha considers the question.

She wears a headscarf and declines to shake the hands of men she does not know when she meets them. Yet her conservative upbringing does not prevent her from discussing touchy subjects with anyone, and her training with C4L has given her a clear-eyed understanding of her rights.

“Although I have a lot of information about sex, it doesn’t mean I am sexually active,” she says. “*Au contraire*, it’s the opposite for me.”

**YOU CAN’T JUST GET GOOD GRADES; YOU HAVE TO NAVIGATE LIFE IN SOCIETY.**

Mohamed Aly Sonko, High School Science Teacher

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**A CLOSER LOOK**

You can read more stories about Oxfam’s work with women and girls on our website: oxfamamerica.org/closeup-women.
THE
CHANGE-
MAKERS
FOR SOME RWANDAN WOMEN, THE ROAD OUT OF POVERTY WINDS THROUGH A PAIR OF FARMING COOPERATIVES. BEKKI FROST REPORTS ON HOW WHAT THE WOMEN HAVE LEARNED NOT ONLY BOOSTS THEIR INCOME BUT ALSO FEEDS THEIR INDEPENDENCE.

In the early morning, mist blankets the valleys of eastern Rwanda's Kirehe District, where dusty red roads cut through the hills. On top of one of them sits the Tuzamurane Cooperative, a certified organic farming enterprise founded 10 years ago. Its specialty is pineapples, and though the squat, spiky plants are growing everywhere, there was a time not so long ago that Valerie Mukangerero couldn't afford to buy any of the fruit local farmers produced.

But that was before she joined Tuzamurane—whose name means “lift one another up.” There, she learned not only how to cultivate pineapples on her own but what it feels like, as a woman, to be empowered and to no longer worry about being able to provide for her family.

In tiny Rwanda, a landlocked country with a population of almost 12 million, a great deal has changed since the 1994 genocide that left more than one million people dead and profoundly traumatized countless others. In the years that followed, steady growth—encouraged by the generous infusion of development aid—brought roads, medical clinics, and security to “the land of 1,000 hills,” where more than one million people have managed to find a way out of extreme poverty.

Some things, though, have been slower to change, like the dismissive attitudes toward women, particularly those whose poverty or widowhood can make them targets of derision. But give a woman in rural Rwanda a chance to prove herself, and you can bet that pretty soon she'll be leaving the naysayers in the dust.

That’s the delicious reality savored by participants in Tuzamurane and a second cooperative, COPPF, or Coopéra-

tive pour la Promotion des Fruits, both supported by Oxfam. These co-ops equip women with horticultural skills, access to markets, and savings opportunities that allow the women to boost not only their incomes but their independence.

Politically, women in Rwanda far outpace some of their Western counterparts. Last year, they occupied 64 percent of the seats in the lower house of the country’s legislature compared with just 19 percent held by women in the US House of Representatives. But on the home front, Rwandan women still face a raft of tradition-bound obstacles that can undercut that public progress.

“One of the key barriers to women’s economic empowerment in Rwanda is the social norm that says women belong to the kitchen and to house chores,” says Gasore Nkunda, who leads an Oxfam program aimed at helping poor Rwandans improve their means of earning a living. “Women have now been given lawful access and right to land at the same level as men. But because of the predominant negative cultural belief, women are still dependent on men and feel the need to always rely on their husbands’ decisions before they can either buy or sell any asset.”

Unless, of course, they happen to be anything like Mukangerero, Flonira Mukamana, or Francoise Mukeshimama. With the confidence earned through their hard-won successes as members of the co-ops, nothing can hold these women back—not even Mukeshimama’s lack of formal schooling.

“I now earn more money than my husband,” she says. “I feel really happy because what gives me strength is that I am earning significant income and yet I never went to school.”

BUILDING A FARM, METER BY METER

Once a bean-cassava-and-sweet-potato farmer, Mukangerero and her husband strived to support their five children on whatever they could harvest. But there were many lean times, especially when she had to stretch her earnings to cover the cost of all-important mutuelle—the local term for health insurance.

“Health insurance has to come first because medical care is expensive and you can’t do anything if you are not in good health,” says Mukangerero, noting that she had to pay 3,000 Rwf ($3.75) per child every year. For a family of seven, the cost was a heavy burden. And though she never missed a payment, her diligence came at a price.

“I was just doing all it takes to pay it and I had to reduce the amount of food in order to pay for it,” Mukangerero says. “Sometimes we were very hungry.”

When the opportunity arose to join Tuzamurane, she seized it.

“I was going to change my life,” Mukangerero says. And though she had never grown pineapples before, she sowed determination with every sucker she planted.

Originally organized by a local priest, Tuzamurane drew on the interests of nearby farmers who knew that pineapples were far more profitable than the staple crops many of them were growing. The co-op, which now has 133 members, of whom 58 are women, was set up both to help farmers grow more of the fruit and to create better links...
with markets. Those linkages have been paying off.

One member reports that before joining the co-op, she sold her pineapples for 50 Rwf (6 cents) each—after paying someone to help her lug them to the market. But through the co-op, she is now earning as much as 250 Rwf (30 cents) for each pineapple.

In 2009, Tuzamurane added a new twist to its production: Members decided to start growing their pineapples organically to tap into an export market where dried produce can fetch nearly five times the price of fresh fruit sold locally. Having located two buyers—one in Belgium and one in France—the co-op made its first dried organic fruit export in 2015, shipping 764 kilograms (1,684 pounds) of deliciousness abroad. Buyers in the US, Canada, and Japan have now also expressed interest in the product, and Oxfam has been helping the co-op manage its expansion by financing some of its working capital and certification fees.

“It is the sweetest pineapple I have tasted,” says Brenda Pennell, an Oxfam program officer. “No hint of the acidity you usually get in pineapple available in the UK.”

For Mukangerero, the result of all of this has been a slow and steady transformation in the quality of her life.

“At the first harvest, I earned a little money and I bought small pieces of land,” she says. “At that time they were not expensive. Each time I got 10,000 Rwf ($12), I could buy a few meters and so on.”

That “so on” now encompasses five hectares (over 12 acres), an expanded house, and a cow.

“All of my land is a result of the co-op,” Mukangerero says. “I feel proud that people respect me and say, ‘That woman is on top.’” Being on top means being able to take care of her family.

“What makes me proud in life is when I buy clothes or food when my children need it and when I can afford school uniforms without worrying,” she says. “I feel rich because I can afford what I need.”

FROM CO-OP TO CHINA

For Flonira Mukamana, a widow with four children who lived for a while in a camp for displaced people, there may be no better proof that hard work and belief in herself have paid off than this fantastic fact: When her son won a scholarship to study in China, she was able to pay for his flight to get there.

“People in the neighborhood could not believe my son was going to China,” says Mukamana, 43. “They were saying, ‘Oh, that woman with the torn skirt—how can her son be going to China?’”
It’s all because of COPPF, says Mukamana. A co-op she joined after learning about it in 2008, COPPF was established by Oxfam and its partner, Duterimbere, and it focuses on producing seedlings for tree tomatoes—small fruits that are sweeter than tomatoes—also known as tamarillos. The co-op has two aims: to empower poor women with skills so they can earn more income and to fill the gap for reliable seedlings that grow well in the rich, volcanic soil in the northern part of the country where Mukamana lives.

With 30 Rwf (4 cents) and the right know-how, a farmer can produce a sturdy tamarillo seedling that she can turn around and sell for 50 Rwf (6 cents). Fast-growing, the seedlings take just three months before they’re ready for market.

“People in the neighborhood would make fun of me, saying I was a prostitute, making fun that I had no husband,” she recalls. And festering behind all of this was the constant worry about her children: How would she be able to afford the food and clothes they needed?

When Mukamana joined the co-op, everything changed for her. The co-op offered training on tamarillo production and marketing. Members learned how to access and use credit, and how to save so they could grow their businesses. The co-op provides a voluntary savings and loans service: when farmers sell their seedlings, some of their profits go into a co-op account from which members can borrow as needed.

That potential was just waiting to be tapped in Mukamana, whose husband was shot when infiltrators invaded their community in 1997. Surviving as a widow was not easy—not in the camp where she lived for a year and was made fun of, nor when she returned home to work on her land alone.

“I paid for his flight,” Mukamana says. “I even took him to the airport and I felt really proud.”

“A CLOSER LOOK

Watch a video of Flonira Mukamana as she shares her story of empowerment: oxfamamerica.org/closeup-tamarillos.

Other things have changed, too, less quantifiable, perhaps, but no less important.

“It [the co-op] has built self-confidence for women and we have become self-reliant,” Mukamana says. “Men in the community perceive me now as a woman of value. They even consider me equal to men when it comes to contributing to the community welfare.”
On January 27, President Donald Trump issued an executive order barring refugees from entering the United States, triggering a public outcry to protect the lives of the most vulnerable. In the days that followed, heartbreaking reports about people detained in airports, families being separated, and the renewed endangerment facing those who had been approved for resettlement flooded the news. Many of you expressed a strong urge to go out and do something, anything, but didn’t know how to harness that outrage for positive action. We heard you. And we had just the tools to help.

On the Thursday evening following Valentine’s Day, more than 50 Oxfam friends, donors, and staffers came together to stand against the ban. Over pizza and soft drinks, attendees penned postcards to Massachusetts politicians—including Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Ed Markey, Representative Stephen Lynch, Representative Michael Capuano, and Representative Joe Kennedy—and President Trump asking them to overturn the ban and protect America’s refugee program.

Portraits of Syrian refugees, many of them on the move and facing difficult choices, lined the entryway, providing a sobering look at real people affected by the ban. Projected on the wall, our message rang clear: “Refugees welcome.”

HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
“People were able to drop in and out at the event, but the Oxfam conference room that housed the postcard writers was buzzing with energy through the night. Organizers even had to drag in extra tables and chairs to accommodate the crowd.

The evening kicked off with remarks from Oxfam’s Ali Al Jundi, who shared his own challenges as a Syrian refugee. His main message, one that is glossed over by the ban, was that the US already has a strict vetting process in place, one that takes years to get through. Al Jundi came to the US on a scholarship, but even then, he said, his journey was not easy. “There is no US embassy in Syria, so I had to go to Lebanon many times to finish the visa procedure,” he said. “My wife had to travel to Lebanon alone with our kids to get their visas, and then travelled to the USA from Beirut Airport.”

Even during the speaking portion of the night, attendees were off and running with their postcards. We supplied postcards, sample messages, and take-home toolkits to help participants host their own gatherings. The templated
language gave guests a way to communicate a clear message, but also provided a starting point for their own creativity. The message to President Trump read: “Dear President Trump, as a voter, I’m urging you to rescind your executive order to slash refugee resettlement and ban immigrants and refugees based on nationality and religion.” As some pointed out, that language helped tone down their own more colorful thoughts.

THROUGH THEIR EYES

By day, Nick Calvino, 27, whips up caffeinated concoctions as a barista at the fair-trade Equal Exchange Café, on the ground floor of the office building that houses our headquarters in Boston. In his downtime, he creates collections of his favorite songs that he gifts to others as a balm for the tough times.

Calvino’s 5-year-old son is half-Thai with grandparents who came to the US as refugees. Calvino said the executive order felt like an attack on the very nature of his son’s being. When Calvino learned about the Oxfam event, he was inspired to compose a soundtrack to fire people up and fuel their postcard-writing. The result was a 16-song mix titled “Up with People (Music for Oxfam),” which he burned onto CDs and passed out to the postcard writers.

Songs like Sia’s mellow, introspective break-up anthem “Rewrite”; “Ohm” by Yo La Tengo, a melodic entreaty to “resist the flow”; and Sly and the Family Stone’s funkified take on the Doris Day classic “Que Sera Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)” set a soothing yet defiant mood.

“It’s important to indulge every once in a while in emotionally rejuvenating activities, to share, and do nice things when you can.”

One of Oxfam’s goals was creating an environment for productive conversations. After discussing the ban with his personal circle, Calvino realized their groupthink was leaving him emotionally drained. The positivity of the event left him feeling energized and better equipped to engage in conversations about the ban.

The evening was a family affair, with a handful of kids in attendance, including two teenage boys who sought tips on adapting the night for a classroom discussion. One of them noted, “Our generation will be fighting for refugees for long after Trump is gone, so it’s important to take action now.”

Oxfam employee Mara Bolis was accompanied by her two young daughters, who brought a sweetness to their postcards with cartoons illustrating why they were against the ban. “It was meaningful to share my work with my daughters and instill in them why it is important to stand up against injustice,” Bolis said.

Fundraising was not on the agenda, so Livingston was surprised when a couple handed her a $500 check to support Oxfam’s refugee work. That donation was the cherry on top.
OXFAM PARTNERS:
STEADY INVESTMENTS ENSURE A HEALTHY HARVEST

Giving monthly as an Oxfam Partner ensures that we have a steady income. That means that if a disaster suddenly strikes, Oxfam has resources on hand to respond without cutting support to other people working to overcome poverty.

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Luz Evelia Godines Solano, from La Chiripa, Nicaragua, is a producer of Tierra Madre coffee, which is cultivated exclusively by women farmers. Pablo Tosco/Oxfam