Oxfam America works with a wide range of organizations to develop innovative solutions to poverty and social injustice. Given the reach, influence, and impact of the private sector, Oxfam increasingly engages with businesses. Although we have the capacity to take on hard-hitting advocacy directed at certain industries, we are equally committed to establishing transformative partnerships with private sector leaders.
WHY OXFAM?

The private sector plays an increasingly vital role in the lives of poor people around the world. Global corporate expansion has been accompanied by shrinking governments, with power and resources shifting from the public to private sector. The resulting imbalance has left large corporations with outsized influence and facing rising public demands and expectations. This dynamic has created urgent and untapped opportunities to pressure and engage businesses in new efforts to address poverty.

Oxfam America is uniquely suited to seize these opportunities and has established a dedicated team (the Private Sector Department) to focus on business actors. Oxfam’s size, capabilities, and approach set it apart from most organizations engaging with the private sector.

Working with its partners and international Oxfam affiliates with a presence in more than 90 countries, Oxfam advocates for constructive and equitable solutions to poverty. Oxfam’s advocacy is founded on deep expertise in development, the reach to follow global investment flows and supply chains, the resources and political influence to apply effective pressure, and the credibility and relationships with key constituencies—governments, corporations, civil society groups, and affected communities.

Oxfam’s private sector engagement is embedded in its local programs in developing countries and global campaigns that focus on agriculture, food systems, extractive industries, climate change, access to medicines, and disaster risk reduction. Within each of those areas, Oxfam seeks to empower relevant stakeholders (local communities, farmer organizations, civil society groups) to change industry practices and influence government and global policies.

Oxfam’s work with the private sector is rooted in three core beliefs:

- Economic growth and healthy markets are essential to overcoming poverty
- Growth alone is not enough, as poverty is fundamentally tied to marginalization and power disparities
- Long-term development solutions require systemic approaches to markets, cutting across government, business, and civil society

Oxfam works throughout the value chain with:

Retailers and global corporations to influence suppliers. For example, to address mining company practices Oxfam and allies worked to secure commitments from retailers and jewelers representing 30 percent of the gold market to commit to the responsible sourcing of gold.

Influential corporate brands and trade groups to advocate for government policies. For example, Oxfam spearheaded a group of companies, including Nike, Starbucks, and Levi Strauss, to influence the US government position on climate change adaptation.

Business groups, multilateral institutions, and governments to set standards across industries. For example, Oxfam has actively engaged with more than a dozen standard-setting bodies and helped secure stronger commitments from the United Nations and International Finance Corporation on business and human rights.

Shareholders, banks, and investors to influence particular corporations. For example, Oxfam helped mobilize collective pressure from communities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and shareholders on Newmont Mining, resulting in a successful shareholder resolution and new board-mandated policies for community engagement.

Oxfam’s “market systems approach” seeks structural change in targeted markets through engagement with a wide range of actors. Oxfam acts as a catalyst in mobilizing key government, business, and civil society actors to identify and address market constraints. As illustrated in the diagram (left), Oxfam seeks to intervene strategically at various points across a market. The approach aims to bring tangible benefits to poor farmers, workers, entrepreneurs, and communities while reinforcing their rights and voice in development.

In working with complex market systems, Oxfam strives to be pragmatic and adaptable. Oxfam understands that companies can be both part of the problem and part of the solution and that a corporation’s real strengths reside within its business practices, its influence over suppliers, and its relationships with industry groups and governments. Oxfam targets each of these actors at those points where it can leverage maximum impact.
HIGHLIGHTS FROM OXFAM’S PRIVATE SECTOR WORK

ADVOCACY

Over the years, Oxfam’s corporate advocacy has played a major role in spotlighting human rights violations by oil and mining companies, in pressuring the pharmaceutical industry on intellectual property rights and tiered prices for developing markets, in driving fair trade coffee procurement by major retailers, and in securing commitments from fast-food companies to strengthen labor rights in their supply chains.

In these and other campaigns, Oxfam has worked with an array of allies—community groups, NGO partners, unions, shareholders, investors, retailers, business groups, academics, government bodies—to highlight abuses, press for reforms, develop normative standards, and push for industrywide and legislative solutions.

Oxfam America counts on an e-community of more than 440,000, a network of student groups, members of Wall Street law firms, corporate champions, and an Oxfam fund that holds shares in targeted companies, as well as Oxfam affiliates and offices across the globe. Oxfam’s advocacy is premised on careful research, an openness to dialogue and collaboration, and deliberate ratcheting up of pressure to ensure constructive outcomes.

FOSTERING INNOVATION

Over recent years, the private sector has shown great interest in the largely neglected four billion consumers living on less than $4 per day. As companies look to develop new markets and redesign products and services for people living in poverty, there are opportunities for NGOs to promote innovations that benefit poor people.

Oxfam has a particular interest in these efforts because they can empower key constituencies like smallholder farmers, community organizations, and female entrepreneurs and can bring broader systemic change to markets. Oxfam’s widespread networks in developing countries, decades of experience working with poor communities, and access to global corporations makes it an ideal broker.

Oxfam has established a fund to bring private sector resources in support of small businesses in Latin America. The Women in Small Enterprise program is designed to foster women’s economic leadership, enhance small firms’ bargaining power in supply chains, and enable public policy reforms that build just and inclusive markets. Oxfam has also embarked on a groundbreaking initiative to bring microinsurance to vulnerable farmers in Africa.

ADVOCACY CASE STUDY: EquiTABLE Food Initiative

Based on its long-standing corporate advocacy with farmworker organizations to pressure retailers around labor reforms, Oxfam and its partners are launching The EquiTABLE Food Initiative (EFI), a groundbreaking initiative of food companies, farmworker unions, food safety advocates, and leading NGOs. EFI embodies a new strategy to assure that US-based farmworkers have decent jobs and good working conditions; that retailers and other wholesale purchasers have sustainable and secure supply chains; and that consumers have safe, healthy, and sustainably produced foods at the marketplace from which to choose.

EFI will soon launch a new system for voluntary certification of farm standards focusing on labor, food safety, and the environment, alongside efforts to strengthen government oversight of labor practices. EFI will include an Agricultural Leadership Education and Development Resource to provide farmers and farmworkers with the training, tools, and resources they need to improve the ethical, safe, and sustainable production of food while also improving business operations.

INNOVATION CASE STUDY: R4 Rural Resilience Initiative

Oxfam America has supported microfinance activities in Latin America, Asia, and Africa for years. Building on this experience, Oxfam has embarked on an ambitious effort to bring microinsurance to vulnerable smallholder farmers. Oxfam has partnered with Swiss Re and organized a range of other actors, including Columbia University, local insurers, researchers and development organizations, and the Ethiopian government, to develop a sustainable and scalable microinsurance product for smallholder farmers in Ethiopia affected by climate change. The insurance product development is closely tied to Oxfam’s existing risk reduction programs that have deep roots in the community.

To ensure sustainability, the process has been participatory and demand driven. The initial stages of the program have concluded that weather index insurance can help farmers reduce their negative risk exposure and feel more comfortable taking on productive risks (such as switching to high-yield seeds). Prudent risk taking should help prevent a slide into poverty and increase farmers’ ability to adapt to climate change. Following on two years of successful piloting, the World Food Program and Oxfam entered into a five-year partnership to expand microinsurance to three new countries.

The project (known as R4) is unique in developing a holistic risk management framework that includes risk reduction, risk transfer (insurance), prudent risk taking (credit), and risk reserves (savings).
TRANSPARENCY

Transparency and reporting are vital to robust stakeholder engagement, responsible and accountable business practices, and innovation to benefit poor people, yet the impact of business on poverty goes largely unmeasured and unreported. Although environmentalists have developed sophisticated tools to disclose environmental impacts, social impacts—impacts on communities, small businesses, producers, consumers—suffer from a lack of tools and attention. This situation has recently started to change. There are now a number of incipient initiatives aimed at bringing social impacts to the fore—and “sustainability reports” by major companies have recognized the need to measure these impacts all the way down the corporate supply chain.

Oxfam is working with investor coalitions and private sector leaders to pressure companies into undertaking more robust social reporting and public engagement. Oxfam is also working with these and other allies to push for stronger rules and laws around reporting requirements for companies listed on US stock exchanges. Additionally, Oxfam engages with companies and communities to develop new tools to measure impacts, including a “poverty footprint” methodology and a community-led human rights assessment tool, as a way to raise awareness and press for greater transparency.

TRANSPARENCY CASE STUDY: Poverty Footprints | Oxfam’s Poverty Footprint Methodology is designed to provide a robust understanding of a company’s poverty impacts up and down its value chain, taking account of its key activities, relationships, and products. Through poverty footprints with major corporations, Oxfam aims to develop a platform for stakeholders to engage companies about major social and economic issues and to bring into the mainstream the ideas that companies need to take responsibility for, report on, and account for these impacts. For companies, these collaborations can provide critical insights and ways to adjust their business practices to mitigate negative impacts and amplify positive impacts.

Following on an initial partnership with Unilever in Indonesia (led by Oxfam Great Britain), Oxfam America worked with The Coca-Cola Company and SABMiller to publish a report on their value chains in Zambia and El Salvador. Alongside this report, Oxfam is engaging with a wide range of investors, business groups, and ratings agencies to promote more robust transparency around poverty impacts.

LEARN MORE

For more information on Oxfam America’s private sector work, please visit www.oxfamamerica.org/privatesector or email privatesector@oxfamamerica.org.

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Oxfam America is an international relief and development organization that creates lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and injustice. Together with individuals and local groups around the world, Oxfam saves lives, helps people overcome poverty, and fights for social justice.

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