

# GENDER EQUALITY AND RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT

EVIDENCE FROM OXFAM'S RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO



OXFAM

Gender-based inequality is one of the main barriers to building resilience as it limits the way women and girls, men and boys in a community and society can respond to and manage change. Transforming gender-based inequality requires shifts in gender dynamics from household to community and national levels. Oxfam's projects are bringing about shifts, such as supporting women's power in decision making and access to resources. Grounding these efforts in gender and power analysis, supporting coalitions and partners, and working with men and boys are key strategies to enable transformative change.

## KEY LESSONS FOR RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT

1. Inclusive approaches to awareness, leadership and economic empowerment result in positive impacts on gender equality and support resilient development.
2. Working with networks, coalitions and alliances contributes to gender justice and resilient development at scale.
3. Progress towards gender equality goals is more significant when programs also seek to shift underlying drivers of inequality between women, girls, men and boys.
4. Dedicated time and resources across the whole project cycle and detailed analysis of power and privilege are essential considerations if gender justice in resilient development programming is to be achieved.



Bangladesh: Archawana Rani Mondal is president of her local crab producer group, which has not only increased the group member's incomes but has also helped them become more empowered. Photo: Tania Cass/Oxfam

## INTRODUCTION

Oxfam has been implementing resilience building programs across the Asia-Pacific region for more than a decade. Evidence from research and evaluations demonstrates how these initiatives support women and men, as well as governments and communities, to build resilience at scale.

**Oxfam defines resilience as the ability of women and men to realise their rights and improve their wellbeing despite shocks, stresses and uncertainty.<sup>1</sup>**

This Evidence Brief synthesises evidence of how Oxfam is working to support increased gender equality so that women and girls and other marginalised groups can be involved in shaping a more resilient future. It highlights how such efforts have improved resilient development outcomes for women and their communities, recognising that much work is still to be done to transform gender relations at different levels.

It is one of a series commissioned by Oxfam Australia that identifies where, how and why **Oxfam's approach to resilient development** has created impact. The findings and lessons are intended to influence discussions among Oxfam staff, Oxfam partners, and the broader development community (in particular, development partners) about how to achieve resilient development outcomes.

## Gender equality and resilient development

Resilient development is only possible when gender-based inequalities are transformed and women and men can fully enjoy their rights. Oxfam has therefore explicitly included gender justice and empowerment in its Framework for Resilient Development. As an organisation, we aim to integrate gender justice and women's rights into all that we do.

**Ignoring gender dynamics and inequalities in our programs can lead to unintended consequences, and risks harming the people we work with.**

Gender-based considerations – like any other power-based considerations – need to be systematically integrated into the design of development, humanitarian and campaign initiatives. This can in turn open up new opportunities for countries and regions to engage in gender justice initiatives while working towards resilient development outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

# FINDINGS

## Key finding 1: Inclusive approaches to awareness, leadership and economic empowerment result in positive impacts on gender equality

Across the Asia-Pacific region, Oxfam is supporting communities to understand gender issues through a range of interventions which has increased awareness of gender inequalities, reduced women's workload, increased women's economic empowerment, and led to greater participation and power of women within decision making spaces.

### Finding 1a: People have increased awareness of gender equality.

Evidence from Oxfam programs demonstrates that they have contributed to increased awareness of gender equality and resulted in changes in attitudes within communities, Oxfam staff and local authorities.

- In Bangladesh, Oxfam's projects have fostered economic empowerment and inclusive leadership in disaster risk management and supported women to understand their rights and how to claim them, while securing better access to — and control over — land, resources and time.
- In Vietnam, Oxfam's project led to increased awareness of staff members and local authorities of the way that the climate change affects women and men differently.<sup>3</sup>
- In Vanuatu, an evaluation of Oxfam's response to Cyclone Pam concluded that Oxfam's efforts contributed to improved voice of women (and men) with disability in national disaster management forums.<sup>4</sup>

### Finding 1b: Women have increased women's leadership and voice in decision making.

Evidence from Oxfam programs demonstrates that they have enhanced women's leadership and voice in decision making at household and community levels.

- In India, Oxfam's project mobilised women at a village level. Through participation in project activities, opportunities were created for women to voice common concerns in community meetings. This also resulted in increased power in decision making at household level.
- In Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, women have taken up leadership positions in community organisations, including community emergency response teams and savings groups. This has led to changing attitudes among men, as it demonstrated that women's views (although often different from their own) have merit. As a result, women are more respected in meetings. This has helped men and women to harmonise their perceptions of risk and supported inclusion.<sup>5</sup>
- In the Pacific region, Oxfam's Pacific Island Resilient Development Framework (PIRDF)<sup>6</sup> identifies that steps to include women, youth, people with disability, and other vulnerable groups in decision making processes have the potential to bring about transformative change.<sup>7</sup> This is because participation is a step toward being able to transform the structures and norms that shape vulnerability to climate and disaster risks.

Despite these advances in gender equality, there are instances of resistance by men to changing the status quo.

- In Myanmar, the project's evaluation found that despite increases in women's position in village power structures, their capacity to lead was openly distrusted in 13 per cent of villages evaluated.<sup>8</sup>
- In Vanuatu, women are still unable to access certain physical decision-making spaces (customary men's houses) due to customary traditions that continue to exclude women.<sup>9</sup>

- In both countries, women reported challenges in balancing new leadership roles with other responsibilities, including domestic roles. This indicates the need for ongoing dialogue with men, boys and traditional community leaders to build support and an enabling environment for women's leadership and voice.

### Finding 1c: Women's workloads have decreased and they have become more empowered economically.

The different elements of resilience programs have meant that they have brought direct benefits to women, including reduced workload and economic empowerment. These outcomes have begun to redress existing inequalities and, at the same time, enable women to be more active participants in resilience building.

Water, sanitation and hygiene programs, delivered as part of emergency response and resilience building projects, have reduced women's workload. This is the result of work to provide of water filters in Timor-Leste,<sup>10</sup> rehabilitation of water tanks in Fiji,<sup>11</sup> and securing access to urban water supply in informal settlements in Vanuatu.<sup>12</sup> These initiatives were delivered alongside conversations with women and men about gender norms and workload, which may have also contributed to broader change.

Other programs have supported women's economic empowerment. There is evidence that livelihood training and participation in support groups has improved the capacity of women to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from economic development.

- In India, savings and loans, and livelihood groups and training are increasing income and promoting resilient development.
- In Solomon Islands, Oxfam partners have supported communities to establish savings clubs. These clubs were established to encourage a risk management mind set and increase self-confidence and motivation, as well as being a platform for women's leadership. "The formation of the savings club has given me the financial security when thinking about disasters. More than that — it has given me, as a woman in a rural setting, the opportunity to be part of the decision-making body in the community." – Female project participant.<sup>13</sup>
- In Bangladesh, Oxfam's projects have supported the establishment of women-led marketing committees to create income generation opportunities for marginalised women. There is evidence that increased income has been a factor in changing gender relationships, with male participants of focus group discussions acknowledging the vital role that women in their families play in running their family. More than a third of women reported that they now receive significant cooperation from their husbands on income generation and on allocation of income in the household.

In these examples, Oxfam partners worked closely with male heads of households to gain acceptance for women's participation in livelihood activities, which were considered culturally acceptable as they could be done from home.

However, there was also evidence that women's involvement in livelihood and water and sanitation activities was sometimes instrumental — that is, the activities were not linked to any goals for more transformative changes in gender equality. It is important to continue to monitor the context to see how any intervention is affecting changes to gender equality.

- In Vanuatu, following disaster recovery efforts, women's increased role in managing water and sanitation infrastructure added to women's workloads. Without efforts to support men to take on some work traditionally allocated to women, the net result may be an increased workload for women.<sup>14</sup>





Vanuatu: Shirley Laban was the first ever coordinator of the Vanuatu Climate Action Network set up by Oxfam and partners. Shirley's leadership on climate change has seen her become known as the 'Pacific's voice on climate change'. Photo: Arlene Bax/Oxfam

## Key finding 2: Working with networks, coalitions and alliances contributes to gender justice and resilient development at scale.

Working with and elevating the voices of partners is central to how Oxfam works to promote gender quality and social inclusion. Disaster risk reduction and resilience projects in Vanuatu and Sri Lanka have sought to engage with national organisations representing women, people with disability and marginalised groups, and to elevate their voices.

- In Indonesia, Oxfam's support for a local women's rights organisation convinced the local legislative body to be supportive of gender mainstreaming in disaster risk management and has seen gender issues reflected in sub-national development plans.<sup>15</sup>
- In Vanuatu, as part of the Vanuatu Climate Action Network, Oxfam played an active role in advocating for women's voice and leadership in national climate change and disaster risk reduction policy discussions (including successfully advocating for equal representation of women on UNFCCC country delegations and the selection of women to represent the country at regional events).
- In Vanuatu, Oxfam partnered with the Society for Disabled Persons (VSDP) during the emergency response to Cyclone Pam. Oxfam and VSDP brought people living with disability together to discuss their immediate needs, as well as strategies for long-term coordination on climate change, disaster risk reduction and humanitarian response. Oxfam provided financial and practical support for VSDP representatives to participate in emergency cluster meetings. This contributed to increasing the voices of people with disability in national dialogue on resilience. "It builds confidence in network members when we know that we have various connections with the private and public sectors who will fight for national disability agendas." – VSDP member.

The impacts from Oxfam's work with partners is covered in more detail in the evidence brief **Building Resilience through Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**.





Sri Lanka: Thilaka Kumari Herat, leader of the local women's group, sits with her fellow group members discussing women's rights and leadership.  
 Photo: Pavithra Jovan de Mello/Oxfam

## PROMOTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN DISASTER RESPONSE

Sri Lanka's vulnerability to climate-related disasters has been clear since the devastating effects of the 2004 tsunami, and in recent years the country has experienced numerous crises due to droughts, flooding and landslides. While these events have been more localised and low level, the disruption they cause to development cannot be underestimated. In 2017, floods triggered by the monsoon rains affected over 700,000 people in 15 districts. In Ratnapura, one of the three worst-affected districts, Oxfam was among the first agencies to carry out a gender assessment after the disaster.

In emergencies, when normal community structures and routines are severely disrupted, women and girls often face additional and different risks to men and boys. These risks are deeply rooted in pre-existing gender-based inequalities within families and communities, which leave women with lower capacities, less autonomy and greater dependency. It is vital to incorporate a gender assessment as part of emergency response planning to ensure that activities are based on women's specific needs and are co-delivered by women themselves.

In the case of the Ratnapura flood response, the gender assessment uncovered serious protection and security issues that were specifically affecting women and girls' wellbeing in camps. For example, lighting was inadequate, no gender-segregated latrines or bathing facilities were available, and tents had zips that could be opened from the outside and windows that allowed passers-by to look in. Camp security was provided by male-only police surveillance, and there was no referral system to report cases of violence or abuse. Furthermore, Oxfam found that discriminatory social norms restricted women's roles to unpaid care and domestic work, limiting their opportunities to take part in decision making. This undermined women's ability to access humanitarian services, and created a clear gap between government service providers and women in affected communities. Using this evidence, Oxfam started engaging with government partners – from the camp up to the national level – to propose an alternative emergency management model. Under this new model, women in Ratnapura would play a key leadership role in addressing camp and gender-related security issues.

Oxfam and its partners successfully pushed for the deployment of Women Development Officers in response operations and for the integration of gender minimum standards in national humanitarian policy and response plans.



### Key finding 3: Progress towards gender equality goals is more significant when programs also seek to shift underlying drivers of inequality between women, girls, men and boys.

Many of Oxfam's programs have sought to increase gender equality through targeted activities for women, requiring women's representation in meetings and decision making forums and collecting gender-disaggregated data.

- In the Solomon Islands, communities realised that empowerment goes beyond women's participation in meetings or activities, but that it must also support an environment where women have equal voice, take part in decision-making, and are leaders in their own right.<sup>16</sup>

The review found less evidence of Oxfam's impact on shifting gender norms and structural inequalities.

- In Myanmar, an evaluation recommended that more long-term engagement is needed to develop an environment that enables both men and women to reconsider gendered norms and responsibilities. This is an important strategy for addressing the men's distrust and disrespect of women in leadership positions.<sup>17</sup>
- In Bangladesh, women reported that men appreciate women's participation in household decision-making, but only on issues

about which women were thought to have sound knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

- In Sri Lanka, an evaluation found limited awareness of, and attention to, the culture of silence surrounding sexual violence and exploitation, and anticipating and managing potential tension and conflict arising from program interventions.<sup>19</sup> This was a significant barrier to developing effective protection and prevention strategies for women, girls or boys during disasters.<sup>20</sup>
- In Indonesia, an evaluation from Oxfam's project in West Sumatra revealed that while it helped increase women's earning capacity, it did not address power dynamics, nor the mind sets and gender attitudes in communities.<sup>21</sup>

These findings highlight the need for broad gender justice and resilience activities to not only highlight the benefits and importance of being inclusive, but also challenge existing cultural norms about the roles of women, girls, men and boys in communities. Future projects should work openly with men and women to explore gender issues, particularly around incomes, decision-making and power dynamics.



Bangladesh: Shumati and her husband Dinesh work together on their farm to rear ducks (for eggs) to supplement their income. Photo: Tom Pietrasik/Oxfam



## Key finding 4: Dedicated time and resources across the whole project cycle and detailed analysis of power and privilege are essential considerations if gender justice in resilient development programming is to be achieved.

Achieving gender equality and building resilience take time and resources, and effective systems and processes in place to design, monitor and evaluate projects and programs that are based on sound analyses of gender and power.

### Finding 4a: Dedicated time and resources for gender are essential in the design and implementation of resilient development programming.

Evidence from programming affirms the importance of having clear objectives for gender, women's empowerment and disability inclusion from the outset of projects. In addition, ensuring adequate time and resources are allocated to activities is critical, recognising that changes in social norms and relations are a long-term process.

A number of evaluations, including from Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Indonesia highlighted that some activities had been rushed, highlighting the importance of proper sequencing during project implementation.<sup>22, 23</sup> The importance of adequate time for women's participation and sensitivity to local norms and consensus making is highlighted in one example from Indonesia.

It is also critical to ensure dedicated resources are allocated to gender and social inclusion priorities in project design and inception. There is consistent evidence from Asia and the Pacific that staff can feel frustrated or disappointed when they do not have adequate time, skills, and access to technical support to best address the particular challenges of different groups.<sup>24, 25</sup> This is observation also applies to the partners that Oxfam works with, as highlighted in evaluations from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste.

While there are many examples of successful initiatives, these were often achieved within tough time constraints and by staff who were not always confident in their own ability. This is particularly the case for staff who worked with people with disability who face challenges that are unique to their context and disability (such as infrastructure design, access to services, and the particular social and cultural attitudes to disability).<sup>26, 27</sup>

### Finding 4b: Monitoring and evaluation systems effectively identify contributions to gender equality only when they were designed to measure these changes from the outset.

Monitoring and evaluation systems that include indicators and evaluation questions to assess changes in transformative capacity (including changes in the social, economic and political conditions that result in structural inequalities) will pick up changes in these. According to the meta-analysis of Oxfam's resilience effectiveness, the majority of projects measured transformative change<sup>28</sup> while looking at only two or three indicators, such as attitudes towards innovation and participation in planning processes, and a wider one on gender equality.<sup>29</sup>

To maintain the integrity of the concept of transformation going forward, resilience programs should track indicators that can demonstrate both higher-level changes and changes in intra-household dynamics, particularly around gender and disability inclusion. This kind of approach to monitoring and evaluation is also required for measuring changes in underlying causes of inequality.

### Finding 4c: Diversity in staffing is important, but do not assume individuals are or want to be representative of a broader group.

While hiring local personnel is a good practice, this does not guarantee the inclusion of diverse local perspectives. Involvement of people from different groups is not sufficient alone as projects must incorporate local representative bodies as well.

- In Vanuatu, the Public Health Engineering Team included one female member and this was reported as providing a positive role model for other women to be more comfortable in getting

involved in technical construction work.<sup>30</sup> However, it is important to be realistic about putting additional expectations on such individuals to play a role in representing general concerns. Engaging with local women's groups can strengthen these efforts and provide individuals with additional support (as explained in finding 2).

In some cases, Oxfam projects took steps to facilitate such groups where they did not already exist.

- In Nepal, Oxfam and partners invested in establishing women's spaces in the early stages of the project for women to build their agency and access peer support. The project used these spaces as a platform to engage with a host of issues that affect women: violence against women, caste issues and poverty issues, among others. By making linkages to relevant issues in the communities, the intervention was able to work with broader dimensions of community vulnerabilities rather than confining itself strictly to disaster risk reduction.<sup>31</sup> This is also a vector for identifying female leaders and ensuring strong female participation, including lower-caste women, in intervention activities.<sup>32</sup>

### Finding 4d: Efforts towards gender equality are more effective when based on a sound analysis of power and privilege.

Multiple projects included some form of gender analysis to inform project implementation. Evidence from evaluations of projects in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands suggests that gender assessments and actions plans should be a mandatory part of programs. These need to be developed at the outset of projects and updated on a regular (annual basis) to ensure they address current concerns.<sup>33, 34</sup> Existing guidelines for assessments and action plans are available, and recommend risk mapping exercises and power analysis, prior to the commencement of new projects. Analysis should also include further exploration of the gender based violence and the experiences of women with disabilities following disasters such as accessible, safe and private sanitation and accommodation facilities in evacuation shelters and building design.<sup>35</sup> Program conception, design, and implementation should incorporate the point of view of the target communities.

These findings affirm Oxfam's commitments that programs must take into account, and be informed by, the social and political processes that make up the context in which where they are implemented.



India: Ratuki Mahela who is a daily labourer and water and sanitation committee member demonstrates how to keep hands clean with chlorinated water. Photo: Atul Loke/Oxfam





Nepal: Sampatiya Devi Khang, member of the local early warning taskforce, helps her community to minimise the future impact of disasters such as floods through awareness, education and training activities. *Photo: Kate Bensen/Oxfam*



## CONCLUSION

Gender equality and empowerment is a core social change process in the Oxfam International Framework for Resilient Development, with high potential for transformation. This is reflected in Oxfam's work to support the representation of women in resilience building activities including elevating women's voices, increasing participation of women in decision-making, and women's economic empowerment. However, more work is required by Oxfam to realise the potential of resilience programs to achieve transformation. This requires more fundamental shifts in gender dynamics at multiple levels (from household through to community and to the national level).

Oxfam should therefore seek transformative change through a holistic approach that tackles individual and systematic issues, and formal and informal processes. This includes: sound gender and power analyses; interventions that are tailored to the context and address underlying causes of inequality and exclusion; as well as work to support partners, coalitions, networks and alliances so the work can have impact at scale. If Oxfam does this then its work can become truly transformative.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The following questions were based on Oxfam's conceptual frameworks, relevant academic literature, and discussions with Oxfam staff.

1. What impacts has Oxfam's resilience programming had on gender equality?
2. How effective has Oxfam been at tracking gender equality in the context of transformative resilience?
3. How have Oxfam's programs (in different contexts) understood and addressed the varied risks, vulnerability, power and privilege of different groups?
4. What can be done within program implementation, management and staffing to increase Oxfam's impact on gender inequality?

35 evaluations and research reports from Oxfam projects from the Asia-Pacific region were used to inform this brief. Findings were qualitatively coded against each research question and emergent sub-themes, and assessed for quality of evidence.

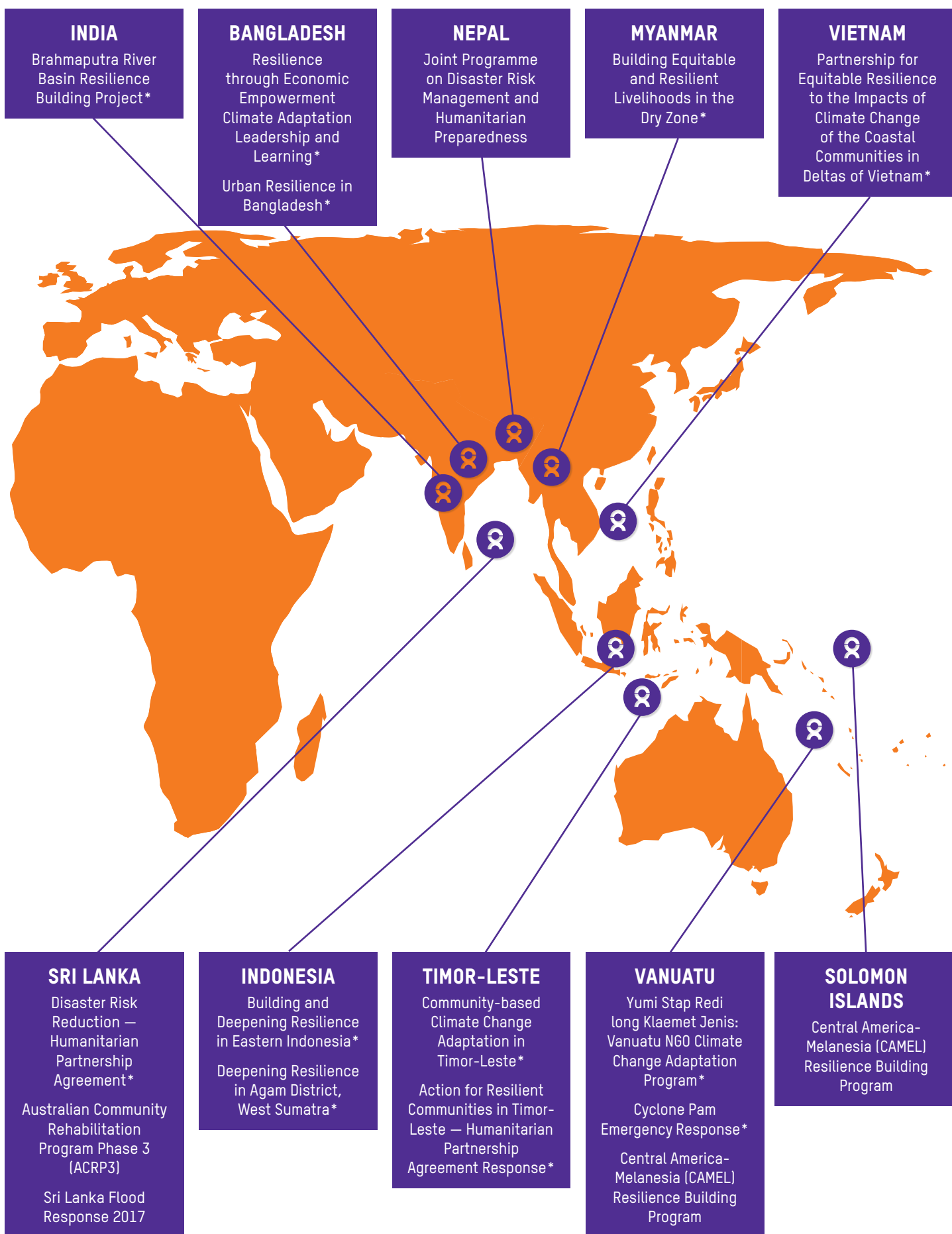
A detailed methodology, including limitations, is available from Oxfam.



Solomon Islands: Women and men from Raho village attend training together to learn how to care for cocoa trees. Photo: Vlad Sokhin Panos/Oxfam



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\*These projects were supported by the Australian Government and implemented by Oxfam and partners.



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# NOTES



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