



# PARTNERSHIPS FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

CASE STUDY OF UNBLOCKED CHAIN PROJECT IN VANUATU

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# OXFAM CASE STUDY – OCTOBER 2022

The Unblocked Chain (UBC) Project was an Oxfam response to several humanitarian events in Vanuatu between 2019 and 2022. It used a multi-stakeholder partnership approach and blockchain technology to provide funds directly to people affected by these events. The key partner was a blockchain specialist, and others included International NGOs, community-based organisations, private sector and Government of Vanuatu agencies.

This case study focuses on the multi-stakeholder partnership approach aspects. It found the approach had some significant benefits for Oxfam, its partners and citizens who benefited from the funds provided. Partners reflected that shared interests, regular meetings, commitment to capacity building and clear communications/messaging all contributed to successful implementation. Some challenges were identified related to the large number and diversity of stakeholders.

Oxfam used its reputation, skills and networks to add value to the Project, facilitating diverse partners to work together to use this relatively new technology in Vanuatu.

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This case study was written by Jodie Kane and Deborah Rhodes, independent consultants in Melbourne. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Melinda Obed-Natapei in its production. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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## ACRONYMS

AHP - Australian Humanitarian Partnership

BBU - Blockchain from the Bottom-Up Project

CSO - Civil Society Organisation

CTP - Cash Transfer Program

CVA - Cash and Voucher Assistance

INGO - International Non-Government Organisation

MSP - Multi-Stakeholder Partnership

NGO - Non-Government Organisation

OiP - Oxfam in the Pacific

TC - Tropical Cyclone

ToR - Terms of Reference

UBC - Unblocked Cash Project

VCWG - Vanuatu Cash Working Group

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Unblocked Chain (UBC) Project (referred to hereafter as 'the Project') led by Oxfam in response to several humanitarian events in Vanuatu between 2019 and 2022, used a **multi-stakeholder partnership** (MSP) approach. The Project used blockchain technology to provide funds directly to people most affected by these events. The use of this technology is relatively new in the humanitarian context, but has been increasingly used elsewhere. Oxfam undertook a pilot activity in some parts of Vanuatu before it was extended across the country in this MSP Project.

As part of the extensive monitoring and evaluation of the Project, Oxfam commissioned this case study of the partnership aspects. Oxfam has a particular interest in the MSP approach and its contribution to the overall Project's processes and achievements. The case study complements other evaluation processes which focus on technological and effectiveness aspects of the Project.

Given the significance of 'context' for all partnership processes, this case study generated information related to the particular people and organisations who collaborated on this Project in Vanuatu at this time. While elements may be relevant for other Pacific countries and potentially other contexts, the particular social, cultural, political and institutional characteristics in Vanuatu form the main context for this case study.

Working in partnership is not predominantly a 'technical' issue, but rather a manifestation of many different human, institutional and cultural factors interacting with each other. As is the case with other types of complex interactions, partnerships can be unpredictable. In part, this reflects the reality that people and organisations have different world views and values, and therefore see the concept and practice of working with others differently. Deeply held socio-cultural and organisational values affect how people see each other, how they make decisions, how they collaborate and what they deem to be effective and successful. Working in partnership, by definition, requires people and organisations to listen carefully, compromise, negotiate, learn by doing, respond to emerging issues and change over time, all of which require particular personal attitudes, values, maturity and skills. These ways of working tend to challenge (and are in reaction to) dominant project-type ways of working which require top-down decision-making, fixed plans to be determined from the outset, clear roles and responsibilities to be formalised and complied with, and progress to be described in terms of achievement of pre-determined plans and 'results'.

Overall, this case study found that Oxfam's use of an MSP approach had some significant benefits for Oxfam, the other partners and the citizens who benefited from the Project. Many of the processes used, including regular meetings, commitment to capacity building and clear communications and messaging, were particularly well-regarded. The case study also found there were some challenges associated with the large number of stakeholders involved, including their diverse values, responsibilities, mandates and size. Organisations viewed their partnership with Oxfam differently, and had varied roles and responsibilities. They noted that governance of MSPs requires particular efforts and processes, including sustained leadership commitment.

Recommendations are listed here for the sake of ready access, and are discussed in Section 5.

1. All new partnerships should allocate time for discussions and negotiations about the degree of shared ownership and specific principles and ways of working that apply in each case, to be documented in customised partnering agreements.
2. Multi-stakeholder partnerships need to consider ways to build and support trust and respectful interactions which are culturally relevant to each context.
3. Organisations which represent relevant segments of the population need to be invited to join multi-sector partnerships to maximise inclusion.
4. Partnership negotiations need to cover only relevant aspects of cooperation to determine the roles and responsibilities of each partner.

5. Partnerships that introduce innovative technology need to allocate additional funds, staff and time for supported and ongoing training for partners' staff on various aspects of implementation, particularly for sustainability purposes.
6. Projects which seek sustainable and systemic changes at national level, including in coordination of humanitarian responses, require engagement with and support from relevant government organisations.
7. When using multi-stakeholder partnerships, specific attention should be paid to monitoring the health of partnerships and maintaining their quality.
8. Partnerships require dedicated governance efforts and systems to contribute to both partnership success, strategic objectives and the likelihood that organisational partners will sustain benefits.
9. Partner organisations need to enable their staff to use partnership approaches, including through training and leadership support, and consider how to retain staff with these skills.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

Technology for humanitarian and development assistance is moving at a fast past globally. The use of blockchain technology as part of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) in humanitarian response programming is beginning to gain traction in the Pacific region. In Vanuatu, Oxfam led the implementation of the Unblocked Cash (UBC) Project, using an MSP approach. It sought and obtained funding from the Governments of New Zealand and Australia, and used its own fundraising sources. Partners contributed in various ways to the Project.

This flagship project for Oxfam began with a well-researched pilot activity in 2019, and expanded significantly in 2020-2021. Overall, the Project sought to provide a humanitarian response to communities across Vanuatu who experienced several events which affected community well-being and safety: a volcanic eruption, Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The UBC project had three major goals:

- Increase access to livelihoods and basic needs for TC Harold and COVID-19 affected households, fulfilling vulnerability and targeting criteria generated by the Vulnerable Livelihoods and Income Impact Survey.
- Accelerate localised and participatory market recovery by increasing household purchasing power to nurture and increase revenue of informal and formal businesses in a localised and inclusive manner that ensures cash transfer funds continue to circulate at the community level.
- Address existing capacity gaps of national partners and expand the scale of CVA implementation in Vanuatu through the provision of a full suite of technical assistance services and tools and a simple, easy to use payment platform to deliver and monitor program implementation (vendor and recipient payments).

As a part of the monitoring and evaluation process, a series of data collection and analysis activities, evaluations and case studies have been developed to identify and analyse different aspects of the Project. The purpose of this case study is to explore and analyse the role of the MSP approach used to deliver the Project from 2019 to 2022.

Oxfam Australia commissioned this case study in May 2022, with the expectation that it would provide partners with an opportunity to reflect on what has worked well and why, and contribute to understanding the enabling factors. It also sought recommendations for future activities using an MSP approach in Vanuatu, the Pacific and beyond.

The case study was undertaken by a small independent team, comprising Melinda Obed-Natapei, based in Vanuatu, and Deborah Rhodes and Jodie Kane, based in Australia, appointed in June 2022. A total of 23 respondents (listed in Annex 4) participated in the case study. Not all partners were available, so it cannot be assumed that all have similar responses to those included here.

This report describes the data collection and review process, as well as findings according to the agreed case study research questions. It also includes recommendations for future programming.

## 2. CONTEXT

### PARTNERSHIPS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The use of partnerships has been widely promoted in the humanitarian response and international development sector in recent decades, including in addressing complex challenges. Governments and stakeholders across all sectors are using partnerships as a vehicle to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals. As outlined in literature about the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 'achieving sustainable development depends to a large extent on the ability to engage in a meaningful way with partners from all sections of society.'<sup>1</sup> MSP approaches are the foundation of projects across a range of sectors in the Pacific, such as climate change adaptation in tourism projects, disaster risk reduction projects and health projects across the region. Oxfam's guidance and policies on MSPs confirm the critical nature of such approaches. Oxfam works in partnership with civil society, women's rights, youth, faith-based and community groups, as well as state, private sector, foundations and non-government organisations (NGOs). Oxfam's 'relationships with partners are based on a mutual respect for the contribution that each party brings. They are informed by shared vision and values'<sup>2</sup>. Oxfam 'works on the principle that each partner works with autonomy and independence and that there are clear roles and responsibilities' and 'also commits to joint learning and ongoing improvement'<sup>3</sup>.

In 'Putting Oxfam's Partnership Principles into Practice'<sup>4</sup>, the following principles are spelled out for 'every level of activity':

- Shared vision and values
- Complementarity of purpose and value-added
- Autonomy and independence
- Transparency and mutual accountability
- Clarity on roles and responsibilities
- Commitment to joint learning.

Section 4 of this case study uses these principles as a framework for discussion of the findings.

Often, the use of partnerships is a reaction against transactional, contractual and master-servant relationships between organisations. The shift is towards more equal arrangements, where collaboration between organisations with shared interests is the foundation of work, and where benefits and risks are shared. Partnerships are increasingly popular when innovative

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<sup>1</sup> ESCAP and United Nations University, 2018, *Partnering for Sustainable Development Guidelines for Multi-stakeholder Partnerships to Implement the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific*, available at [MSP\\_Guidelines.pdf \(unu.edu\)](https://www.unu.edu/publications/msp-guidelines)

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<sup>2</sup> Partnership at Oxfam, website, see <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/partnership-at-oxfam/>

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<sup>3</sup> Partnership at Oxfam, website, see <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/partnership-at-oxfam/>

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<sup>4</sup> Oxfam, 2016, *PUTTING OXFAM'S PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE* Oxfam's Partnership Toolkit: Minimum requirements and good practice guidelines, available at <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/611581/ml-partnership-policy-into-practice-020616-en.pdf?sequence=1>



approaches to achieving transformational change are used. Analysis of the practical application of partnership principles in diverse contexts is still emerging, but there are many examples from various contexts.<sup>5</sup>

In international development, the issues of funding and perceptions about the relative power of donors tend to make genuine and fully equal partnerships relatively rare. However, increasing efforts are being made by development organisations such as Oxfam to use partnership principles and approaches which are locally relevant. These efforts are consistent with global efforts towards decolonisation of aid programming and localisation of knowledge and responsibilities in aid management. These movements make the context for partnerships more crucial, and there is much to learn in different contexts about ‘what works well and why?’ including across different cultures.

In a 2018 Oxfam report<sup>6</sup>, the following key lessons about partnership approaches were identified in relation to resilience, and could arguably apply to broader development:

1. Leveraging relationships with national civil society, government actors and the private sector helps to achieve resilient development outcomes.
2. Engaging with the private sector in resilience building, helps to broker fair access to products and services, and supports the resilience of small-medium enterprises.
3. Working in partnership with civil society organisations increases inclusive approaches to building resilience at scale.
4. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are most effective when they are grounded in a shared understanding of resilience, create spaces for reflection and learning and innovation, and build both implementation and influencing capacity of partners.

## CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE IN THE PACIFIC

In the past two decades, CVA has gained momentum in humanitarian assistance and social protection as a preferred method of delivering assistance to people in crisis, so they are able to meet basic needs. The method is relatively new in the Pacific; Oxfam and several other international development NGOs began to use it in several countries in 2018.

CVA programming is based on a recognition that cash enables people to purchase what they need in times of crisis and supports wider communities through engaging with existing local markets. In this way, people’s dignity is upheld and they can make positive changes in their lives which they prioritise themselves.

A major international report about cash transfer schemes in 2015 made 12 recommendations related to giving more unconditional cash transfers, making more efficient cash transfers delivered through stronger, locally accountable systems and using different funding to transform existing systems<sup>7</sup>. Many guides, toolkits and research reports have been developed in the past two decades globally, but few have been generated in the Pacific.

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<sup>5</sup> Resources and publications collated by the Partnership Brokers Association and Partnering Initiative include various examples, see <https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/resources/> and <https://thepartneringinitiative.org/publications/>.

<sup>6</sup> Oxfam, 2018, Building Resilience through Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, available at <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/building-resilience-through-multi-stakeholder-partnerships-620562/>

<sup>7</sup> Overseas Development Institute, 2015, Cash Transfers: What Does the Evidence Say? <https://odi.org/en/publications/cash-transfers-what-does-the-evidence-say-a-rigorous-review-of-impacts-and-the-role-of-design-and-implementation-features/>

Overall, international experience suggests the following factors contribute to successful CVA programs:

- cash readiness and preparedness
- strong partnerships
- localisation and coordination
- market stability
- strong processes and systems
- compatibility with traditional social support mechanisms
- ensuring that understanding of the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts of the countries is deeply built into all aspects of the program.

## **OXFAM'S WORK ON CVA IN THE PACIFIC AND VANUATU – THE UNBLOCKED CASH PROJECT**

Oxfam, in collaboration with a range of other organisations, has undertaken CVA activities through a blockchain modality in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. This includes programming, commissioned research and other forms of collaboration. For example, the Pacific Cash Preparedness Partnership began in 2017 and was the foundation for the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) orientation towards (and major investments in) cash preparedness.

Oxfam responded to the opportunity to use CVA in localised and inclusive ways in Pacific countries by strengthening its own staff skills and exploring some of the challenges involved through research and pilot activities. An important aspect of its work has been the formation of partnerships with a range of organisations with expertise in the use of blockchain technology in the private sector, and organisations with direct links to communities who may benefit from this approach.

In Vanuatu, Oxfam piloted the use of blockchain technology 'to develop a customised, user-friendly e-voucher system specifically adapted to the capacities, market environment and implementation context' (from ToR). This pilot, conducted from April to June 2019, came after the Ambae volcanic eruption response, which used conventional cash instruments via the issue of cheques in partnership with two banks (November 2018 to March 2019). The costs and difficulties of using a 'conventional cash' approach during the Ambae response were part of the justification for the use of blockchain technology later, in 2020: the new approach presented clear cost savings during the pilot phase. This pilot, called the 'Unblocked Cash Pilot' was expanded to become the Unblocked Cash Project (UBC) to respond to the Yasur volcanic eruption in Tanna, in the form of a multi-purpose grant to assist evacuees, and later to people in three provinces (Shefa, Tanna and Tafea) affected by Tropical Cyclone Harold and COVID-19.

Research conducted after an initial Project pilot phase in 2019 detailed experiences and lessons from the distribution of funds to 187 heads of households and support to 29 vendors. Reporting confirmed that 1,209 individuals in two urban communities in one of the world's most at-risk countries benefited from this pilot phase<sup>8</sup>. Analysis of the pilot phase primarily addressed technical aspects, but also noted some aspects of partnerships including the centrality of trust,

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<sup>8</sup> Oxfam, 2019, UnBlocked Cash: piloting accelerated cash transfer delivery in Vanuatu: research report, available at <https://oxfamilibrary.open-repository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620926/rr-unblocked-cash-delivery-vanuatu-311019-en.pdf?sequence=1>

particularly with communities.

Detailed research about technical and management aspects of the pilot activities, commissioned by Oxfam, is included in the report 'UnBlocked Cash: piloting accelerated cash transfer delivery in Vanuatu research report.'<sup>9</sup>

According to Oxfam's AHP C19 Pacific Package Proposal, Oxfam, as the technical lead, presented the expanded UBC proposal to the members of the Vanuatu Cash Working Group (VCWG). The VCWG comprises representatives of organisations with interest in cash programming in Vanuatu, both government and NGOs. The VCWG was a source of participants in the Project's design process and also the platform for deep discussions on funding requirements and geographic and household targeting (see Annex 5 Secondary Data List). A range of key documents and data, including The Vulnerable Livelihoods and Income Impact Survey, vetted by Oxfam, expenditure per household and partner mapping results were considered by the VCWG for the Project design. Expressions of Interest were circulated to all CWG members to solicit implementing partners for the response.

Implementation of the Program involved a successful multi-crisis humanitarian response to Yasur Volcano, TC Harold, and COVID-19 in the period 2019 to 2022. As noted above, Oxfam explicitly sought to use the MSP approach, the focus of this case study. As a result, it led a collaborative process with 25 local and international partners to implement the Project. This included organisations from the private sector, local civil society organisations (CSOs), international NGOs (INGOs) and Government of Vanuatu authorities and departments (see Box 1).

Oxfam played a role as 'convenor, broker, facilitator, and coordinator' (from terms of reference (ToR) as well as specialist in community development. Details of these roles are included in Section 4 below.

Overall, the Project was implemented across Vanuatu and distributed CVA to over 35,000 people, identified largely through partnerships with local organisations.

Section 3 describes the case study methodology, Section 4 discusses the findings, and Section 5 provides a summary of lessons and recommendations.

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 7 above

# 3. THE CASE STUDY

The expected primary audience for this case study includes members of the Oxfam Confederation, other INGOs involved in the use of related activities, regional networks interested in humanitarian responses and blockchain as a CVA modality for social good, as well as the Government of Vanuatu, national NGOs, CSOs and international donors.

The development of this case study commenced with the preparation of ToR by Oxfam, followed by a tender and contracting process. Developing the case study ToR included collaboration with the members of the Cash Response (UBC) team in Vanuatu, implementing partners, private and other stakeholders, including Government of Vanuatu officials.

The case study team was appointed and commenced work in early June 2022. A relatively limited timeframe was available and the process was completed in August 2022. This limited timeframe should be considered in terms of understanding the scope and coverage of the case study.

A case study plan was developed by the three-person team approved by Oxfam as a means to translate the ToR into a practical set of steps, schedules and processes. During the case study data collection process, an outbreak of COVID occurred in Vanuatu that resulted in lockdowns and other events, limiting face-to-face meetings. Not all stakeholders agreed to participate for various reasons.

## CASE STUDY PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The case study is expected to contribute to Oxfam's interest 'to determine Oxfam's role as a non-technological partner in implementing and scaling distributed ledger technology (DLT) based work, drawing on the UBC response project in Vanuatu.' This case study is a part of the Blockchain from the Bottom Up (BBU) Project (Outcome 2.1) which followed the UBC Project. The outcomes are noted below:

The two expected BBU outcomes were:

- Outcome 1: Increased access to cash entitlements for disaster affected women and men (scale in Pacific and other regions)
- Outcome 2: Increased awareness and understanding of CVA approaches and applications of blockchain technology among humanitarian stakeholders.

Within Outcome 1, the focus was on UBC replication and capacity building. Within Outcome 2, the following objectives were described:

1. To undertake participatory analysis of the project from the perspective of key stakeholder groups including users, vendors/traders, local humanitarian actors (local CSOs, Oxfam country staff and others), local authorities, Sempo and Oxfam UBC Cash Team.
2. To ensure transfer of key knowledge and skills, including introduction to blockchain technology, applicability of the technology in CVA programs, and key learnings gathered from the completed pilots across the Pacific and other regions by conducting a series of embedded workshops and learning events.
3. To determine benefits (cost, efficiency, transparency, flexibility and adaptability to link with

other nexus programming such Livelihoods, Women's Economic Empowerment, Social Protection etc.), through a comparative analysis of UBC blockchain methodology and other CVA delivery methods and tools in humanitarian and development settings.

The ToR for the case study stipulated that it 'should document and evaluate Oxfam's role in ensuring the successes of UBC. Ultimately, this will contribute to knowledge and learning for both the sector and Oxfam to understand, document and communicate the value of NGOs in implementing DLT-based initiatives such as the UBC project.'

## CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

The process of planning and developing this case study led to the development of an agreed set of overarching questions, as follows:

1. What was the nature of the partnership for this project?
2. How did the partnership approach contribute to a relevant and beneficial Blockchain project?
3. How replicable is this multi-stakeholder partnership approach in Vanuatu and the Pacific?

The full list of overarching and sub-set questions is included in Annex 1. These were developed based on the original case study questions as provided in the ToR.

## CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

The case study used a mix of methods, including:

- Analysis of secondary data and other relevant documents provided by Oxfam (see Annex 5 for list)
- Interviews with UBC team members involved in development/implementation of the Project
- Interviews with representatives from selected organisations which partnered with Oxfam.

Questions used for data collection and the sources for the answers are included in Annex 2. Questions for each set of stakeholders are listed in Annex 3.

Oxfam Vanuatu provided a list of 17 stakeholders after consideration of various factors. They were contacted initially by Oxfam and then by the case study team to invite them to participate and set interview times. If invited personnel did not respond, further communication was attempted before a conclusion was reached that they did not wish to participate or were not available.

A list of 23 people who agreed to participate in the case study is included in Annex 3. The transcripts of interviews were analysed to identify key themes related to the case study questions. These were then used to structure the report (from Section 4 below).

Several limitations affected the case study: the COVID-19 pandemic; lack of responses from senior Government of Vanuatu officials; and few opportunities for in-person interactions.

# CASE STUDY PRINCIPLES AND ETHICS

The case study team applied principles consistent with various international codes of conduct for cross-cultural evaluations, including:

- Use of a strengths-based approach – meaning the process sought to generate a shared understanding of partnership experiences to date and success/influencing factors, as well as to generate a shared vision for future emphasis and effort
- Openness – of information given to the highest possible degree to all involved parties
- Confidentiality and data protection – measures to protect the identity of all participants and any other information that may put them or others at risk
- Public access – to the results when there are not special considerations against this
- Broad participation – the relevant parties should be involved where possible
- Reliability and independence – the evaluation should be conducted so that findings and conclusions are correct and trustworthy
- Sensitive – to child rights, gender, diverse SOGIE, disability, age and cultural contexts
- Do no harm
- Respect for all
- Humility
- Acknowledgement of diverse world views
- Compassion and solidarity
- Excellence in the process
- Focus on the benefits for all those involved
- Commitment to use of accessible language and accessible processes.

The case study team was responsible for the ethical and consent aspects of interviews with stakeholders. In relation to ethical aspects of this evaluation, in summary:

- Stakeholders were asked to consider providing consent either verbally or in writing
- Stakeholders were invited to choose whether their name was included in an Annex of the report
- If stakeholders agreed to participate, they were advised that their words could be used in the report, but the source would not be identified individually
- The questions and method for data collection sought to avoid any risks of harm to participants
- The expected benefits of the evaluation were conveyed as part of the consent process
- There is a realistic plan and time frame for sharing the results: Oxfam will be responsible for ensuring the report findings are made accessible to participants/stakeholders
- The methodology was deemed appropriate to the context and purpose
- The information generated through the data collection was analysed and presented fairly
- The data is safely stored.



## 4. FINDINGS

The UBC Vanuatu project was developed and delivered on the foundations of the MSP approach. In principle, the MSP approach encompasses, but is not limited to, collaboration, ownership, equality, inclusiveness, transparency, trust and accountability.

Discussions with partners in the UBC Vanuatu project uncovered a range of perspectives on partnership. These included: the definition of a partnership and what it means to them; their roles in this partnership; their sense of ownership, inclusiveness and empowerment; and enabling factors that supported the quality of the partnerships and the ability of the partners to achieve the Project's results. Partners also shared suggestions for how the MSP approach could be used in future activities in Vanuatu and the Pacific more broadly.

The UBC Vanuatu project used a consortium approach comprising organisations such as INGOs, Vanuatu NGOs and CSOs, Vanuatu Government ministries, commercial companies, financial institutions and donors. **Box 1** lists these organisations.

<b>Box 1: Partners and their roles in the UBC Vanuatu Project</b>
<b>Lead Partner</b>
<p>The catalyst for the Project, Oxfam, convened the MSP and played the role of technical lead, knowledge broker, coordinator and facilitator of the Project. The lead partner included staff based in Vanuatu, Fiji and Australia.</p> <p>Oxfam</p>
<b>Implementing Partners</b>
<p>These 10 organisations identified and approached citizens and vendors to benefit from the CVA through their contextual understanding of and direct links with communities</p> <p>ADRA – Adventist Development and Relief Agency</p> <p>VDPA – Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy</p> <p>VSPD – Vanuatu Society for People with Disability</p> <p>VBRC – Vanuatu Business Resilience Council</p> <p>CCCV – The Conference of Churches of Christ in Vanuatu</p> <p>VCC – Vanuatu Christian Council</p> <p>Further Arts</p> <p>World Vision Vanuatu</p> <p>Save the Children Vanuatu</p> <p>Red Cross Vanuatu</p>

### **Vanuatu Government Partners**

These six partners were involved in discussions and compliance processes related to government legislation, policies and procedures affecting project governance, as well as community engagement

Ministry of Agriculture

Department of Local Authorities

Sanma Provincial Government

Shefa Provincial Government

Tafea Provincial Government

Reserve Bank of Vanuatu

### **Technology, Accounting and Banking Partners**

These five partners provided various degrees of specialist technology inputs and advice, assistance and training in a wide range of project design and implementation processes.

Sempo

Digicel

ViewPx

Barrett & Partners

Wanfuteng Bank

### **Donors**

These three organisations provided official development assistance (ODA) funding for the UBC Project

MFAT - NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs

DFAT - Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

The inclusion of the 25 different organisations listed above in a project partnership was ambitious. Even in partnerships between two organisations there are often considerable difficulties. The large number of organisations involved in this Project suggests there is considerable potential for multiple complexities. This case study found some of the strengths and challenges involved. It found that partners have different views on the definition of partnership and this influenced their expectations and perceptions of 'success.' These differences have consequences for the actual relationships between Oxfam and the partners and among the partners more broadly. The first two sections below address definitional and expectations aspects, which form a foundation for analysis of the partnership experiences and lessons described from the third section onwards.

## **4.1 Definition of partnership**

This case study confirmed a common finding in international literature that definitions and perceptions of partnership vary between people and organisations. These variations influence

the quality of each partnership, the nature of partnership processes as well as outcomes of projects. As Tennyson explained *'The term partnership is often not defined, or even explored, by those who are operating as partners – in fact it is not uncommon for partners to hold very different views of what being in a partnership means even when they are part of the same partnership.'*<sup>10</sup> Since the word 'partnership' has been used in practice to mean a broad range of relationships, from genuine or true partnership, to contractual and master-servant relationships, acknowledging the diversity of views is important.

The large number of organisations involved in the Project meant that many people were involved at various stages and in diverse roles. They represented different organisations in the private, public and non-profit sectors. Since individuals can understand the concept of partnership differently, their expectations about practical aspects and what a partnership can achieve, may also vary. In the context of this Project, differences relate to values associated with the idea of cooperation with others, their roles in their own organisation, their responsibilities associated with collaborating with Oxfam and other partners, and their specific engagement on this Project.

Different definitions of partnership and frames of reference may influence people's reflections on their experience of this Project. Cultural values influence understanding about collaboration and partnership with 'others'. For example, a person from a hierarchical cultural context is likely to value the idea that those with authority should make decisions. They may view events and processes through that lens, even if other partners hold different values. If they see many people with competing views and witness uncertainty about who is in charge, they may consider this to be chaotic rather than beneficial. Similarly, a person from a collectivist culture may consider that only people from their particular group can be trusted, so sharing power across unknown or new organisations may appear to be a negative rather than positive process.

This case study considers Oxfam's use of a particular definition and approach (see definition in Partnerships section above), recognising this definition is not necessarily shared by others. Oxfam has clearly documented its interest in partnership approaches and increasingly seeks to support its staff to apply these, including in Vanuatu. Inevitably other organisations and individuals may have their own definitions, interpretations and expectations.

Related to the different definitions of partnership, the application of partnership concepts can be understood differently. When partnerships are developed across cultures (social and organisational), additional levels of complexity apply, reflecting diverse values about relationships, power, decision-making, task completion, change and risk<sup>11</sup>. Most (but not all) organisations involved in this Project comprise ni-Vanuatu personnel, even those which are part of international federations. Therefore, cultural values in Vanuatu are likely to be shared across them. For example, Vanuatu culture is relatively hierarchical, collectivist and relationship oriented compared with Australian and New Zealand cultures, which are relatively more egalitarian, individualistic and task oriented. The manifestations of these values in partnerships are significant. For example, in a more individualistic culture (like Australia), each person is likely to expect their contributions will be equally valued. In comparison, in a relatively more hierarchical culture, it is more likely that those who see themselves as having less power will defer to those who they consider to have more power, and those with power expect others to follow their lead, rather than take initiative and challenge the status quo.

The stakeholders involved in this Project described their experience of coming together, both with Oxfam and with other partners. They noted that dedicated resources (skilled leadership,

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<sup>10</sup> Tennyson, R. *Animating Alliances*, 2018, available at <https://partnershipbrokers.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Animating-Alliances-%E2%80%93-Ros-Tennyson-14.6.18.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> For example, see House, R. et al (editors), 2004, *Culture, Leadership and Organisations: The GLOBE Study*, SAGE

facilitators, and time, mainly) and efforts are needed for listening and negotiation. They noted these are key for determining agreed definitions of partnership and principles or ways of working for this partnership. They implied that if one organisation imposes their definition on the other, this is not a partnership. A key message from this finding (see Section 5) is that use of an MSP approach, by definition, requires considerable time, leadership, effort and resources for listening, negotiation and then documentation and monitoring of partnership agreements.

Oxfam has produced guidance which includes suggested partnership principles. These can be usefully applied in the process of engaging with new partners and establishing new partnerships, particularly if they take account of cross-cultural value differences and do not impose cultural values from one context to another. Since each partnership context is different, guidance that provides for context-specific and partner-specific principles to be determined is important. In addition, if these generic principles emphasise the value of context-specific monitoring and reflection processes during partnerships, then these can also contribute to quality and benefits over time.

The organisations consulted for this case study valued the opportunity to discuss the partnership approach with Oxfam and each other. They also valued the opportunity to experience the benefits of the MSP approach. They suggested that in future partnerships, dedicated time and effort be given to discussing and negotiating partnering principles and ways of working at the commencement of new projects. Since this Project included the use of a relatively new technology, which most partners were not experienced in, and where the level of interest varied, partners confirmed that good quality and early discussions on defining each partnership are particularly important. Introducing a new technology, such as blockchain, can bring about different layers of complexity for adoption and acceptance, which may be encompassed in different levels of uncertainty. Risk can be reduced by having multiple perspectives and exposing new partners to different ways of working from the beginning of the project. In this case, Oxfam and Sempo's close working arrangement with all partners, as well as the overall MSP approach and extensive capacity building activities, contributed to promoting acceptance and adoption of the new technology.

## 4.2 Nature and scope of partnership

MSPs seek to bring a collective approach to making positive change. According to the Partnership Brokers Association 'multi-stakeholder collaboration is critical if we are to create a more inclusive and sustainable world.'<sup>12</sup> Partnerships can range in their degree of intensity or in other aspects of collaboration. For example, partnerships can be transactional/functional or transformational, formal or informal, more egalitarian or more centred on one organisation, inclusive or exclusive, as well as limited or boundless. In transformational and boundless partnerships, partners can come together to achieve a wide variety of systemic, planned and unplanned results, limited only by their imagination, energy and resources. For example, a group of UN agencies noted that '*Transformational partnerships require multiple actors to bring together essential complementary resources, especially knowledge and data sharing, that, when combined create the levers required to transform systems from an unsustainable, undesired state, to a more sustainable state that continues to provide benefits without continuous external inputs.*'<sup>13</sup> The World Resources Institute states that '*Transformative partnerships leverage the contributions of governments, business, and civil society*

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<sup>12</sup> [The Partnership Brokers Association](#)

<sup>13</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020/Developing-Transformational-Partnerships>

*organizations (CSOs)*<sup>14</sup> and others also refer to the concept of multi-sector collaboration. At the other end of a spectrum, some partnerships can be limited in their expected results and scope, focused on a particular pre-determined result, and linear and planned. The approaches to partnership used in the UBC Project had elements along this spectrum, with a clear and specific tool and expected result, plus some scope for creative and collaborative work to determine how to apply the tool in the Vanuatu context. While it is not feasible to determine whether the partnerships could contribute to addressing other issues in future, the case study did identify some interest in future collaboration that may not have occurred without this Project.

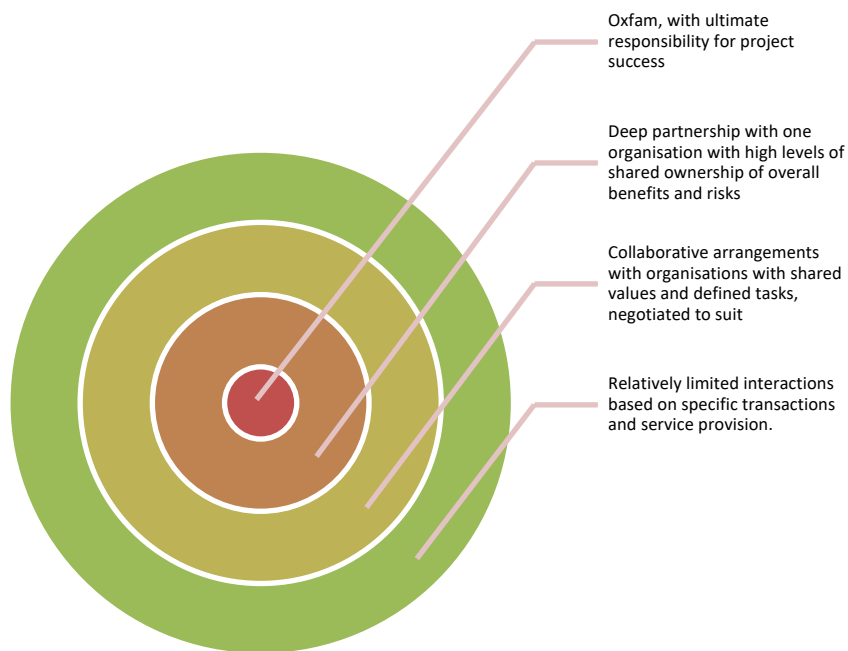
There are appropriate times for both types of relationships, as well as mixes of these elements. The requirements of each project, the context, resources available, limitations and proposed outcomes will influence which mix or emphasis is appropriate. Partners' different roles and responsibilities, as well as their interests and expectations, play a part in shaping the nature of specific relationships.

This case study found examples of partnerships in the UBC Project with both transactional and transformational elements, at different times and among different partners. Understandably, there were different levels of partnership intensity across the multiple organisations listed in Box 1, and between individuals within each organisation. This section seeks to categorise the level of 'partnership intensity' for the sake of understanding the way in which partners worked together on the UBC project. Distinguishing between different levels of partnership is valuable since not all interactions need to have the same features and therefore require the same level of resources and attention. Importantly, partners do not have the same expectations about partnerships. The level of partnership intensity varies for various reasons and these variations influence all aspects of partnership practice. This one-dimensional categorisation is not sufficient to describe all the complexities involved, but at least sets a foundation on which the various practical elements of partnership can be considered in more detail.

While partnering principles could be applied by Oxfam to its interactions with all organisations listed in Box 1, the case study found that the Project involved a small number of deep partnerships, a larger number of moderately collaborative arrangements and a similar number of relatively transactional engagements. While there is no need to definitively categorise each relationship between Oxfam and each organisation (they may not sit neatly in one category or may have elements of several categories), there is value in confirming that partnerships have varied levels of partnering intensity. Figure 1 illustrates this diversity of partnership intensity in this Project:

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<sup>14</sup> World Resources Institute, 2020, [A Time For Transformative Partnerships | World Resources Institute \(wri.org\)](#)



**Figure 1: Diversity of Partnership Intensity**

Oxfam considers its own multiple roles have been critical to the project's success and is aware of its responsibilities, status, reputation and investment in this project. The case study ToR notes:

*'Oxfam's ability to leverage social 'trust' capital to broker the relationships and maintain the collaborations required for the development and successful deployment of the UBC model has been key. UBC's 'multi-stakeholder approach' in Vanuatu is distinctive for Oxfam for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the project engages a broader range of sectors and types of actors than is usual in the Pacific. While Oxfam has extensive networks and experience in community development, with NGOs, CBOs, and government service providers, UBC has required engagement with the Reserve Bank, financial institutions, telecommunication providers and a tech start-up. This ecosystem of local actors has played a key role in ensuring the development and roll-out of a solution that is contextually relevant and inclusive. Secondly, the solution in question is a novel, untested technology, which gives rise to a range of perceived implementation risks, for example, uncertainty among key stakeholders or resistance to uptake. UBC, however appears to have successfully navigated this complex set of relationships and partnerships.'*

Relationships between the three different teams within Oxfam (in Vanuatu, Fiji (regional) and Australia) are critical to the partnerships in this context. The case study identified that a major re-structure within the Oxfam Confederation which occurred early in the implementation phase of the Project affected these partnerships, as well as some aspects of implementation. Several partners noted that the re-structure contributed to some confusion, inefficiency and duplication as new responsibilities were allocated to different personnel, with varied levels of understanding and interests. While this experience reflected a particular time in the evolution of the Oxfam Confederation, it is worth being aware organisational changes can affect the quality of partnerships and thus project processes and results (see Section 4.8).

In the next circle from the centre of Figure 1, the organisation which had the deepest relationship with Oxfam for the duration of the UBC project was Sempo. Oxfam and Sempo were strongly invested in the Project's success and played highly significant roles in the design process, including the definition of scope. They were deeply involved in most aspects of detailed implementation and monitoring/reflection processes. Sempo was brought into this partnership



for its technical expertise, so it was essential that they were highly engaged and invested in the partnership and making the project successful. Both organisations expressed a strong sense of ownership and felt they shared a sense of success in relation to the Project's benefits and risk-taking in relation to the challenges involved. This is consistent with 'true' partnership.

A representative of one of these organisations described the partnership as *'very much a collaborative partnership.'* *They shared ownership of the Project with Oxfam, including the 'project benefits well as how to manage the risks together.'* This experience gave them a clear sense that they were part of a transformational partnership. When reflecting on their in-country engagement with partners and beneficiaries, the partner said, *'[If Oxfam said], we need X Y and Z and we just built it, it wouldn't be as good at all. Oxfam would not be able to translate those requirements and see what a beneficiary might need versus not: it would be lost in translation. The most success is where there is a strong partnership element. We're trying to build a project together and we're there to serve the beneficiaries and vendors better. It is not like a finish line. It's more of an iterative approach to software development.'* Transformational partnerships are about mutual benefits, co-creation and design, equal contribution of resources (monetary or non-monetary) and ownership.

In the next circle out in Figure 1, a larger number of organisations were asked by Oxfam to collaborate on certain aspects of project implementation. They did not share the same level of ownership of the overall project, nor felt responsible for overall benefits and risks. Most were invited to participate in various processes to determine the Project's design and implementation, including through the VCWG. The organisations in this category largely expressed the view that their efforts contributed to the Project's success in particular areas, such as identification of local organisations and citizens who would participate, provision of advice on specific processes or definitions of coverage, and access to telecommunications and internet connectivity.

Within this group of organisations, largely INGOs, Vanuatu Government organisations and CBOs, there were more diverse views about the partnership with Oxfam. Some saw their partnering arrangement with Oxfam as strong and important, while others described less intense interactions focused on one or several specific issues. One representative from an INGO spoke about their strong partnership with Oxfam. They said that their own efforts contributed greatly to reaching communities across all of the islands due to the decentralised nature of their organisation, and this complemented Oxfam's technical advice and leadership. They said, *'Oxfam has the expertise to lead the implementation of the proposed project, but our strength is that we are decentralised across all provinces in Vanuatu. ...[this] 'has definitely helped with ensuring the Project is contextually relevant, as we know the communities and what they need.'* This is an example of equally bringing resources to the partnership and providing value-add to a partnership.

Partnership with government organisations was identified by Oxfam and several other stakeholders as one of the major challenges in the Project. In part, this reflected the use of new technology that was unfamiliar to Government of Vanuatu agencies, so responsibilities for government engagement had not been allocated to any particular office. The process of negotiating which office would engage with Oxfam took time and effort. Once a successful connection was made with the Department of Local Authority, Oxfam and its partners were able to work effectively with selected Provincial authorities in Tafea, Sanma and Shefa. One representative from a Provincial authority said, *'we are really happy with CTP [Cash Transfer Program] ... it's a transparent and accountable administrative program'* and then identified a long list of challenges in the specific context, related to implementation. Oxfam understands Government of Vanuatu leaders and officials have mixed views about the technology aspects of the Project. They understand that these reflect views on implications for legislation, policy, and

financial management systems. Oxfam remains committed to ongoing advocacy to promote the concept.

In the outermost circle in Figure 1, several organisations described their involvement in the UBC project implementation as transactional in nature. They recalled they provided specific services as contractors or service providers. They saw the relationship as operational, practical and process driven. For example, one partner said, *'we are the service provider: we don't get too involved with it [decision-making]. Not that Oxfam didn't invite us to meetings, we were always invited....we provide the service to them and as long as they are happy with the service, that is really just our role.'* This organisation had no interest in shaping the nature of the Project, influencing the scope or being at the table in implementation terms, but rather in *'keeping Oxfam happy as a client.'* Another said, *'We played a role 'behind the scenes' working closely with Oxfam and the people at Sempo [but not the other partners.]'* While Oxfam may well have sought to apply partnership principles to these relationships, the organisations were not necessarily interested in sharing responsibility for project benefits or risks, so did not consider themselves to be partners in the same way those organisations in the 'inner circles' saw themselves.

Related to the issue of official collaboration, is the relationship between Oxfam and the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu. While there is no specific legislation on the use of blockchain in Vanuatu, the Reserve Bank has ultimate authority to regulate the use of financial and payment instruments in Vanuatu. A representative of the Reserve Bank commented at the July 2022 Advocacy Workshop *'there needs to be further research and discussions before we can adopt this concept in order to assist our communities.'* Oxfam describes the relationship with the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu as a strong sign of an inclusive partnership, though its provision of a 'Letter of No Objection' implies more of a transactional relationship than a collaborative partnership.

Another distinction can be made between formal and informal partnerships. As noted above, the nature of collaboration between people and organisations is strongly influenced by cultural values which prevail in each context, so different expectations about the nature of partnerships may prevail. For example, in most Pacific cultural contexts such as Vanuatu, strong cultural values associated with the maintenance of harmonious and largely informal relationships within kinship groups include an emphasis on mutual obligations. In this context, achieving trust-based relationships **between** different groups can be challenging. Also, in Vanuatu, considerable attention is given to hierarchical values, meaning that respect for those in more senior positions (traditional or formal) can trump the idea that everyone in a partnership has an 'equal' voice. One Vanuatu implementing partner highlighted the importance of working within existing governance structures and systems they have with communities for an intervention such as CVA to be successful. They made reference to *'the chiefly system that held the community together'* and the importance of not disrupting these systems with new systems. In the example this partner described, chiefs decided on the households that would benefit from the CVA and worked in partnership with the partner to mobilise the community. The partners worked hard to *'conduct a lot of awareness activities with the community regarding this response'* particularly in countering misinformation about Oxfam being affiliated with a particular political party.

In western cultural contexts, such as Australia, western Europe and the United States, formal partnerships between organisations are generally seen as means to achieve specific results, rather than as benefits in themselves. In these contexts, there is an emphasis on jointly setting plans, completion of tasks and meeting of deadlines. Also, there is relatively more emphasis given to reducing power differences between people (e.g., reflecting values about equality and equal opportunity) rather than respecting more powerful or senior people and organisations. These different values related to task completion and collaboration are important aspects of organisational partnerships across cultures.

The discussion above also relates to different perceptions about the number of partners within the UBC project. While written documents were relatively consistent, interviewees referred to the number of partners being three, 10 or 19 at different times. Box 1 indicates a total of 25 organisations were considered by Oxfam as part of the MSP, although not all organisations were involved across the life of the Project.

Broadly, Oxfam applied partnership principles (discussed in Section 4.3 below) to all relationships, regardless of the intensity of engagement with each partner. Even if relationships were more transactional in practice, broad partnership principles were used. Interestingly, the documentation of these partnership principles varied widely. This is likely manifested in the fact that different stakeholders considered the nature of their own partnership with Oxfam differently, depending on their perspectives, experience and roles. The consequences of these different perspectives and experiences are described below, using headings from Oxfam's guidance on partnerships.

### 4.3 Key elements of the partnership approach

It is widely understood that an effective partnership involves partners coming together to discuss and agree on shared common principles and ways of working. As noted above, partners often come from diverse backgrounds with their own set of informal or formal principles and values. The process of coming together to develop shared common principles is critical for partnership success. It can be as valuable as the partnership's outputs or outcomes and can lead to sustainable collaboration way after initial activities are completed. The process of negotiating shared principles and ways of working promotes mutual respect, encourages trust and supports good communications when carried out in a culturally respectful manner. In the case of the UBC Project, partners had mixed views about the extent to which common partnership principles were developed or documented at the outset. Some valued the process they experienced in their own partnership with Oxfam while others reflected there was a missed opportunity to develop shared principles across all partners.

At the global and regional level, Oxfam has actively promoted the use of the MSP approach. The Oxfam in the Pacific Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Framework (OiP MSP) was in draft form during the development of this case study, so cannot be formally referenced. However, it can be acknowledged that this framework builds on Oxfam's Global Strategic Framework 2020–2030<sup>15</sup> and Oxfam's International Partnering Principles<sup>16</sup> with a focus on the Pacific context. While Oxfam acknowledges that partnerships are all contextually different, they aim to follow these six principles:

- shared vision
- complementarity of purpose and value-added
- autonomy and independence and interdependence
- transparency and mutual accountability
- clarity on roles and responsibilities; and
- commitment to joint learning.

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<sup>15</sup> Oxfam, 2020, Global Strategic Framework: Fight Inequality Together, We Can End Poverty and Injustice available at [GSF 2020-2030\\_ENG\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf \(oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> Oxfam, Partnership Principles, undated, available at [oxfam-partnership-principles\\_1\\_0.pdf](#)

The case study uses these six principles to consider the perspectives and experiences of partners in the Project, since they are broad enough to be useful in the Vanuatu context.

## Shared vision

At the beginning of any partnership, it is important for each partner to share their values, interests and concerns related to the collaboration broadly and the Project in particular. This helps to create a shared vision and develop common principles and values to guide the partnership. Several partners highlighted the value of Oxfam's approach to developing partnerships, some did not comment on this issue and others suggested there was scope for more focus on this in future partnerships.

One partner commended Oxfam for its high-level engagement and noted that Oxfam did a *'good job negotiating with partners'*, noting there was a process for developing partnership agreements. Since many partners had participated in the Oxfam-convened VCWG, they had participated in developing Project objectives. Additional organisations were not involved.

Partnership agreements were developed between the initial pilot project and the beginning of the UBC project. These documents referred to tasks related to partner mapping, engagement with other organisations and showcase events designed to promote the value of the Project among potential partners. One partner referred to these showcase events as a means to encourage partners to sign up to partnership agreements. They said, *'It is difficult to say how much partner's buy-in might have increased during the showcases because there was no actual programming behind it. I think it did make a difference though when it came the time to actually signing partnership agreements and scaling the Project.'* This stakeholder noted that these events and activities helped to highlight that *'this [project idea] wasn't something random, it wasn't something new, it was something that Oxfam had been working on for a long time and that they had done the due diligence for stakeholders.'*

Overall, the two organisations that were in the deepest partnership, Oxfam and Sempo, had the highest degree of shared vision for this project. Other organisations signed partnership agreements or other types of agreements with Oxfam and had varied levels of shared vision. These depended on the extent of alignment between their own interests and those of Oxfam and the Project, as well as the extent of their practical involvement in project activities. This had implications for the nature of collaborations and reflections of these organisations on the nature of partnership.

## Complementarity of purpose and value-added

In the context of partnerships, there is generally an expectation that partners collaborate for mutually beneficial purposes. Therefore, it is therefore important that partners perceive the purpose of the partnership is valued and there is an alignment of views about the value added of collaboration. In the case of the UBC project, partners expressed varied views about the degree of complementarity between their organisations and Oxfam in terms of the purpose and 'value-add'. Several partners mentioned the Project was directly aligned with their own specific priorities and purposes, through their engagement with a range of humanitarian activities.

Most partners focused on the value that their own organisation contributed, when reflecting on their interest in what they saw was 'an Oxfam project'. Several INGOs highlighted the decentralised nature of their organisation, meaning they were able to contribute their ability to reach communities and use networks with community-based organisations and volunteers. One partner said, *'We have strengthened this collaboration as we have offices, services and volunteers across all islands in Vanuatu.'* Another partner said, *'[we and other NGOs helped to]*

*expand the reach of the Project because it tapped into lots of different networks and that was beneficial and valuable'. When discussing the extended reach of the Project due to the partnership approach, one partner said, 'To use the other NGOs' deep links in the communities and their understanding of the context, on top of their own deep links to particular communities, [helped] ensure the success of the Project'. Together, the partners felt they were able to create an interdependent system and to achieve more by working together than by themselves. One partner expressed the view that Oxfam's approach of using INGOs and local partners already established in the Project sites sped up the process of data collection and verification. It also used referral systems on the ground to address community issues. Another partner said, 'It may have taken them [Oxfam] longer to do it themselves and they wouldn't have known some of the communities as well as the other NGOs.....the partnership was very valuable in that sense'.*

While Oxfam approached each partner knowing they have their own purpose and could contribute in diverse ways to the Project, it sought to maximise alignment and complementarity through the use of partnering principles. One partner said, *'The partnership approach also valued and recognised the different players, the roles they have, their technical expertise ... allowing the partners to contribute to the response'*. At the broadest level, the partners shared a common interest in supporting Vanuatu communities in the context of humanitarian events. At the level of each partnership, the extent to which there was an alignment of purpose and a shared understanding of the value of collaboration appears to vary. This is understandable but suggests that efforts to negotiate a shared vision between Oxfam and each partner, as noted above, are particularly important.

### **Autonomy, independence and interdependence**

Oxfam's approach to partnerships recognises that partners are invariably separate organisations, with their own histories, strategies, interests and priorities. The use of MSP approaches does not assume that partners will work entirely in partnership, but operate partnerships on certain activities, while undertaking other work independently. This is especially the case when it comes to organisations in the private and public sectors and differs widely from partnerships with non-government and community-based organisations. In the UBC project, Oxfam's status, perceptions of power, the diversity of partners and a range of other factors contribute to a particularly complex picture in relation to the degree of autonomy, independence and interdependence.

Oxfam is a large, widely known and well-established INGO, and this shapes others' perceptions of the organisation, including perceptions of its relative power and status by partners. While the principle of working with other organisations promotes the idea that each organisation will operate relatively independently for some time and relatively closely at other times, how this works in practice and how each partner understands the consequences of this idea varies. In the UBC project, the degree of partnership intensity discussed above influenced the degree of independence of each partner. For example, the three teams within Oxfam – at the centre of the circle in Figure 1 – could be expected to work relatively closely together, rather than independently. The two organisations involved most closely in the leadership of the Project, Oxfam and Sempo, worked very closely together over an extended period, while maintaining their own autonomy. The organisations which collaborated with Oxfam on aspects of implementation experienced much higher degrees of autonomy overall, coming together more often for specific purposes than for general partnership purposes.

### **Transparency and mutual accountability**

Oxfam is highly commended by partners for its transparency and communications throughout

the implementation of the UBC project. For example, one partner highlighted the openness and sharing of information by Oxfam as a highly valuable element of the partnership and the Project, saying, *'There's a lot of openness and sharing of information which was critical, particularly in a place like Vanuatu.'* The partner explained that Oxfam had freely shared its intellectual knowledge because it wanted more people to use this [blockchain] platform. They said Oxfam wanted all partners to feel involved and that they *'were not hoarding this [blockchain technology and CVA] for their own purposes. [This] was breaking the status quo by pushing to ensure all partners started on equal footing.'* Another said, *'The partnership approach that Oxfam takes, not only with the response but also with the other programs, is to listen and allow partners to give their views and feedback.'*

One partner expressed the view that there could have been a more *'concerted effort to share information on a consistent basis'* at the national level. This was expected to be the role of VCWG, but due to various reasons, such as the lack of dedicated coordination capacity, this group did not function as well as it could have. As Oxfam's focus on the response grew, resources were re-directed from coordination to response. This is seen as a consistent issue in CWGs in the Pacific, and globally at present. Partners also indicated that communications and accountability at the provincial level, along with the INGOs who all had their own relationships in the provinces, proved to be effective. This involved sharing information transparently through regular meetings and the use of infographics, videos, social media and blog postings.

Oxfam's commitment to transparency was illustrated by its efforts to ensure full access (with Creative Commons License) to all materials, documentation and UBC Toolkits for all members to use, which includes communications, training agendas and M&E tools.

Many partners expressed the value they saw in the weekly (and then monthly) partner meetings. One partner said, *'Whatever challenges we faced as partners, some of these different challenges, we came together, we sat together and we discussed those challenges. Each partner shared the challenges they faced during the field work and then came up with the solution. We have a good relationship with Oxfam and all of the partners.'* This partner expressed difficulties they faced in the field with tensions between people who did not receive any funds through the Project. While partners consistently valued regular discussions at the management level, these may not have been fully shared at the community level, raising concerns for some partners.

Sempo was commended for its approach to transparency. Several partners highlighted the fact that the dashboard and app were accessible and transparent for all partners. One partner said, *'Organisations can see what is directly going to the beneficiaries, because all of the information is there. It was helpful to have access to this clear information.'*

## Clarity on roles and responsibilities

For a partnership to be effective, partners need to agree on and be clear about their respective roles and responsibilities, as well as have agreed, efficient and feasible methods to adjust roles and responsibilities in response to monitoring, if required. This lends itself to mutual accountability and a streamlined and well-managed project. Having people in partner organisations with good knowledge of their own and others' roles is key for successful partnerships.

The partners interviewed for this case study generally agreed that they understood their organisation's particular roles and responsibilities in the UBC project. For example, one Vanuatu implementing partner said, *'I think responsibilities must be shared and spelled out in the*



*beginning of the partnership.* Some partners noted the importance of clarity around roles and responsibilities when asked to consider what could be strengthened in future.

Those organisations involved in the process of determining criteria and identifying citizens to receive funds through the Project were particularly happy with their participation. For example, one said, *'With this kind of program, it is more effective if we are involved, because we know our clients.'* They added *'We had a voice in the decision-making process particularly in identifying vendors that would be registered to be part of the Project.'*

Partners also expressed their understanding of the importance of minimising chances of overlap and duplication and maximising chances that opportunities are not completely missed. Several explained that they had relationships in some parts of the country, and they appreciated Oxfam's interest in including them and others with different geography-based links, for the sake of national coverage.

One partner expressed concern about their perception of the lack of shared high-level governance of the Project by partners. They noted there was only one joint governance meeting at the beginning of the Project and considered it would have been beneficial to have these continue. Oxfam's internal re-structure (where Oxfam Vanuatu transitioned from reporting to Oxfam Australia to Oxfam in the Pacific) was the reason behind the lack of follow-up governance meetings and that *'essentially the leadership team was dismantled without being replaced.'*

### **Commitment to joint learning**

Oxfam sought to encourage other organisations to understand and take on the use of blockchain technology in humanitarian responses through this Project. A highlight of the Project is partners' strong and shared commitment to learning more about how to deliver CVA through blockchain technology to communities in Vanuatu and the wider Pacific. Multiple training processes and learning opportunities on different topics were organised as part of the Project. This included training for partner staff, training for vendors, awareness meetings for different stakeholders and communities, workshops on various technical and other aspects of implementation as well as supported on-the-job learning opportunities for staff and others in various organisations. Learning opportunities extended beyond the specific Project delivery. One Vanuatu organisation said, *'We also offered training in financial management and business management services to the vendors involved in the Project, including in remote places. The Project gave us the opportunity to provide services to remote areas consistent with the decentralisation of government services.'*

Many partners spoke of their organisation's capacity in CVA being strengthened through their active participation in the Project. For example, one partner said, *'The partnership approach was designed to build the capacity of other partners. We certainly have our capacity strengthened and I think some of the other smaller partners would have as well.'* Another partner said, *'This Project has helped build the capacity of our volunteers in the provinces of CVA and how it can be rolled out.'* Another said, *'Capacity building was across the board for all the partners, from INGOs to community-based partners. This is to ensure that there is sustainability in the use of the system and the approach.'* Another said, *'Thank you to Oxfam for investing in capacity building of faith-based organisations to be able to implement the CTP program.'* According to the UBC Endline Report (see Annex 5), 64% of partners increased their knowledge in CVA basics and 83% increased their knowledge in CVA design. The report also indicated that 92% of partners increased their knowledge and expertise in CVA monitoring, while 88% of partners increased their knowledge and expertise in CVA implementation.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning processes are a critical element of partnerships, both in terms of the quality of partnership processes, and the effectiveness of project activities in achieving their expected results. Learning about what works in each context is particularly relevant in this Project, given the new technology and the need for substantially different ways of working, engaging with citizens and compliance with government legislation and systems. One partner commented favourably on the effectiveness of the monitoring and evaluation framework for this project and how it supported continual learning for all partners, as well as reporting to donors.

Oxfam's support for staff of its major technology partner to travel to Vanuatu during the pilot phase of UBC was highlighted as an example of this principle. The partner said this was critical for their understanding of the operating environment and their ability to provide an appropriate technological response. The technology partner saw this as an important learning experience, particularly in terms of meeting citizens, vendors and staff of the other partners, so they had a better understanding of specific requirements.

The shared commitment to learning contributes to a sense of sustained benefits for many Project partners. One organisation reflected, *'Relationships built during the Project lasted long after it ended.'* The potential associated with organisations collaborating, building on their interactions during the Project and their common language and experience of the UBC approach could be significant. Another commented, *'CTP has helped us set up systems within our organisation that would facilitate fast responses in the event of [future] disasters.'*

Oxfam staff also confirmed their commitment to joint learning and the benefits of strengthening capacity through a partnership approach more broadly. One said, *'After hearing about the success of the roll out in Santo, Oxfam Solomon Islands indicated interest in inviting Oxfam Vanuatu staff to train government officers in how to implement the program. The partnership approach is not only happening in [Vanuatu], but also in the region, in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji.'*

## 4.4 Shared ownership of project ideas

Partners' perceptions of shared ownership of the concept, objectives, benefits and risks of the Project varied widely. These different views largely mirror partners' different roles in the Project and the actual level of engagement and connectedness they displayed, reflecting the level of partnership intensity discussed in Section 4.1 above. In other words, the level of ownership of the Project's elements is higher for those with more intense partnerships with Oxfam, and lower for those who saw themselves as service providers, on the outside of the circle in Figure 1.

While the origins of the UBC concept are found in an externally driven agenda rather than initiated in Vanuatu, Oxfam sought to generate a strong sense of local ownership of Project implementation processes. The level of 'ownership' in Vanuatu of the Project *overall* appears relatively low in that it was limited to those involved in deep partnership at the centre of Figure 1. However, the level of ownership of *specific aspects* of implementation was relatively high. As discussed in Section 4.2 above, a shared vision and other partnership principles play an important role in supporting ownership of projects. Respectful and culturally appropriate dialogue about concepts, objectives, benefits and risks all contribute to shared ownership and effective partnerships. One Vanuatu organisation said, *'When we signed the Partnership Agreement with Oxfam, that gave us a sense of ownership...and the Project allowed us to take ownership.'*

Those organisations with the deepest level of partnership intensity understandably expressed a

higher level of ownership than other partners. One technology partner confirmed, *'Particularly from an intellectual property standpoint, a lot of information and the learnings were shared: there was ownership between Oxfam and us'*. They expressed a sense of *'ownership over the Project's benefits, as well as how to manage the risks together'*. This sense of ownership matches the level of investment in the Project through this organisation's partnership with Oxfam.

One other implementing partner noted that they shared both the overall benefits and the risks of the Project. They described benefits as gaining the experience and strengthening their capacity as an organisation to deliver CVA with blockchain technology. They reflected whether this was an option for their organisation in other future projects. From the risk perspective, they described the reputational risks that they carried when there were significant limitation issues (related to other implementing partners' capacity and ability to deliver). They said, *'We certainly shared the risk in terms of our name being closely associated with the Project. If it went wrong, we were in trouble: we didn't want to see it go wrong for humanitarian reasons, and the impacts of TC Harold and COVID.'*

Other implementing partners explained that they felt some degree of ownership in relation to the targeting criteria, which they felt was very important from a contextual and community perspective, but this did not apply to the Project overall. They said, *'We all contributed and came up with the concepts that were built into the criteria: we all had ownership over the assessments and the registrations. It wasn't just Oxfam doing it alone'*. Most partners highly valued the fact that Oxfam included many organisations in decision-making about selection criteria for beneficiaries and said this contributed to their sense of ownership. For example, one said, *'We used each other's networks to reach community. We shared experiences and lessons learnt. We got to learn from each other, so we all know what work is done by each NGO.'*

Recognising the issue of shared ownership, Oxfam highlighted that AHP consortium members (including World Vision, Save the Children and Red Cross) were involved in significant consultations in the early design and concept phase of the Project. In addition, members of VCWG were informed and invited to contribute. Oxfam recognised the significant importance of working alongside Vanuatu implementing partners to support *'targeting the right people and being inclusive'*. Regular meetings were also a vehicle for sharing information, supporting decision-making processes, and promoting ownership over the Project.

As the leading partner, Oxfam placed considerable emphasis on ensuring that all partners were extensively briefed on the Project. This included explaining the objectives and inviting other organisations to join the partnership. From there, partnership agreements were developed and signed. Several interviewees suggested that coordination meetings among partners could have been improved during implementation. For various reasons, including the major internal Oxfam restructure (described as *'unsettling'*) and the loss of senior managers at the same time, these meetings were not regarded as particularly useful. Both other stakeholders and Oxfam staff themselves considered that country staff were *'all hands-on deck'* during implementation. This included *'going from province to province to deliver the Project [which meant] there wasn't anybody left to facilitate those meetings'*.

A consequence of the level of ownership generated of this Project includes the perception that organisations have new skills and knowledge, in relation to partnerships, CVA and blockchain, that may contribute to future related activities.

## 4.5 Inclusiveness and empowerment

A partnership approach, the localisation agenda and movement towards more inclusive approaches, all recognise the importance of national partners having a 'seat at the table' from the early stages of a new development-focused partnership and project. This concept supports 'co-design' and 'co-creation' practices which are expected to encourage inclusiveness, empowerment, and sustainability.

At one level this project can easily be given a tick for inclusiveness given the UBC project included 25 organisations from various sectors. One interviewee particularly valued having multiple NGOs in the partnership, noting this approach creates extended links into multiple communities. They said, *'If you have an event that sort of sweeps a country in multiple areas, there is real strength with a consortium approach. So, we know that those communities will be well looked after with people that they trust.'* On the other hand, another partner questioned the size of the partnership, indicating that there were too many partners from a coordination, governance and compliance perspective.

The inclusion of two organisations focused on disability rights ensured that people with disabilities participated in setting the criteria and as recipients of CVA. One said, *'We were engaged to verify the people with disabilities that were identified as beneficiaries of the Project. The CTP approach gave people the freedom to choose what they needed.'* Similarly, the inclusion of faith-based organisations contributed to ensuring inclusion. For example, one church organisation noted their particular interest in 'leaving no-one behind' in terms of the criteria. The critical role of chiefs and community leaders was acknowledged by several partners, in ensuring an inclusive approach was applied, and addressing issues that arose during the response.

The extent to which partners felt a sense of belonging and of being valued for their contribution is a better measure of inclusiveness. Partners' perceptions of inclusiveness and empowerment in this project, and whether they were included and considered in certain aspects of the Project, paint a more nuanced picture of inclusiveness.

One partner recognised that considerable work went into the planning and preparedness phase of the Project, and they were closely involved in transparent decision-making. However, they noted that the internal restructure in Oxfam had a major impact on the implementation phase, including the ways of working. They said, *'The national staff worked really hard during this unstable time. They tried to keep on top of everything. When you can't keep on top of your own management, what goes first is good partnership practices and you're just working to put out fires and try to keep things running.'* This reflection confirms that within Oxfam, comprising three teams in Vanuatu, Fiji and Australia, those most responsible for the Project have an influence on broader partnerships.

Another partner had a very different perspective. It believed that Oxfam took into consideration and encouraged participation from all relevant partners. It said, *'There was partnership mapping and analysis done and we came up with the partnership for the response that included all of these organisations.'* This perspective, based on past experience and contextual knowledge of Vanuatu, confirms that different partners can emphasise different aspects of inclusiveness, depending on their own frame of reference and priorities. Inclusiveness is not only driven by the lead organisation, but is experienced by partners, who are likely to have different priorities and interests in being included.

Oxfam believes that the MSP aspect of the UBC project helped to ensure that it was more inclusive and empowering than previous forms of assistance for partners involved. While they note there is room for improvement, they did highlight that the Project was particularly

empowering for the Oxfam Vanuatu staff and the excellent work they did under difficult circumstances during the implementation phase. One said, *'I thought it was really magical to see a group of people take so much pride in being the experts. Their peers in other INGOs and people more senior than them in communities were asking them how this all works. It was great to see them embrace it and take the lead.'* This illustrates the localisation agenda in humanitarian responses.

In the international development sector, inclusiveness also commonly refers to the extent to which people with a range of different characteristics are involved in and benefit from projects. This includes strategies to ensure people of different genders, people from different locations or with different identities, or people with disabilities for example, are included in planning and implementation. The Project clearly sought to ensure that people most affected by the disasters and most marginalised in poverty terms, were included and supported. While the emphasis in this case study is on the issue of organisational inclusiveness rather than community-level inclusiveness, the fact that many organisations with community connections were included, is related to the strategy to reach communities who were defined as having the greatest needs.

## 4.6 Navigating issues in the partnership

Many partners attributed the high level of openness and transparency in the Project to the streamlined ways in which issues that arose during implementation were navigated. They made specific reference to the establishment and running of a call centre that was available to all partners, vendors and citizens who had a query or concern about the assistance provided. One partner said, *'The call centre became a place for collecting information and redistributing it. That was one thing that worked quite well.'* Another partner said, *'We had a lot of issues with the cards. One of the good things about the partnership was that Oxfam set up a call centre, so it was a free call to the centre about any problems that were happening and issues were worked out from there. Anyone could call it: community, partners, beneficiaries, and vendors.'* Most partners placed high value on having access to the call centre. This is evident in monitoring reports and the final evaluation of the Project (see Annex 5) as well as in interviews.

One partner highlighted Oxfam's expertise in risk management and the importance they placed on managing relationships with partners. For example, they noted that building genuine and respectful relationships was a pivotal aspect of the partnership, enabling successful navigation through many complex issues. They said, *'Relationships with the vendors are strong and people understand the process and their role in it. They've got to have a good relationship with the bank. They've got to have someone auditing and making sure that everything's working properly and the payments are going where they require. They've got to have good relationships with vendors on the ground, the shopkeepers to make sure they're acting appropriately, and the vast bulk did, and then they've got to make sure they've got the community on board.'*

One international partner highlighted that working with new and innovative technology required a lot of 'learning by doing' which can be challenging in a risk-averse context. They reflected this meant it was essential for partners to work together through each issue and reiterated that having multiple perspectives reduced risk and uncertainty. Oxfam's decision to partner with a specialised technology organisation with the expertise to navigate the new technology, greatly assisted in managing risks and working through issues. In many cases there were no obvious 'quick fixes' but simply negotiated ways forward. The partner explained a lot of practical aspects needed ongoing discussion, with a tolerance for trial-and-error approaches, and continual feedback. This partner highly valued Oxfam's encouragement for them to travel to Vanuatu to gain a good understanding of the working environment (i.e., limited internet access) and user-

needs at the early concept stage of the Project, which informed the entire software design process, therefore reducing the risk of irrelevance.

## 4.7 Enabling factors

As noted above, partners said Oxfam's openness and transparency were key enabling factors contributing to Project successes. One partner noted that regular meetings helped the partnership to work well in terms of transparency, problem-solving and joint planning. This enabled partners to discuss, share and address emerging challenges. Another partner shared similar sentiments about Oxfam's openness by saying *'It's not like Oxfam saw this as a way to make a lot of money for themselves. They didn't try to own the whole thing and keep everybody else at arm's length. They've trained everybody, in all aspects of it. The dashboard is open for everybody to look at. So, they've been very open with their technology. They have shared their intellectual knowledge that they have built up and shared it very freely because they want more people to use this platform. So, I think that's been really useful, the openness.'*

One partner highlighted that the type of partnership programming used by Oxfam, one of openness and transparency, was well received, saying *'Partners took to it like a duck to water.'* They noted there is a strong appetite for this type of programming in the future, while confirming that *'the approach needs to be better managed'* for it to succeed in practice.

Other partners shared the view that the partnership approach and the inclusion of a wide range of implementing partners, with extended networks and reach in different parts of Vanuatu, was a key factor in the success of the Project. For example, one said, *'It expanded the reach of the Project because it tapped into lots of different networks and that was really valuable.'* Another partner said, *'there was a real contribution that each of the partners made because they did a lot of the determination of beneficiaries: they know their working areas and communities best.'* Another said, *'CTP was a success because the group of people forgotten in a lot of response events benefited greatly from this program. Thank you, Oxfam, for creating criteria that targeted this group of people who face the most challenges in our communities.'*

Reflecting the Project's inclusion of different organisations is the shared commitment to inclusion at population level (see section 4.5 above). Almost all partners highlighted this as a success factor for the Project.

Another success factor noted by partners was the strong commitment to monitoring at the systemic and local levels. According to one partner, *'This meant that issues arising were addressed in real time.'* The call centre, noted in section 4.5 above, was particularly valued in this context.

Finally, the strong emphasis on learning opportunities for a wide variety of people was also noted as an enabling factor (see section 4.3 above).

## 4.8 Oxfam as a partner

*'The more I engaged with Oxfam on CTP, the more my interest grew'*

Partners recognised various aspects of Oxfam's organisational reputation and expertise relevant to the UBC project and partnership approach. At the regional level, several partners noted that Oxfam is regarded as playing key advocacy and policy roles in the Pacific with *'extremely*



*valuable humanitarian and development knowledge'. One partner said, 'I think a lot of the unblocked cash work in the Pacific wouldn't be possible without that initial advocacy work and also their excellent reputation'. Some partners spoke of the value that Oxfam brought to the partnership, particularly through their extended reach and experience working with partners in Vanuatu. The Project itself enabled more organisations to understand Oxfam as an organisation and for Oxfam to learn about others. For example, one partner said, 'the partnership helped Oxfam understand the environment of work for the different partners. Partners who did not know the role of Oxfam in the beginning, now know what is Oxfam's work. This created relationships and trust between partners.' They added, 'Oxfam created an eye-opener for other INGOs with the partnership approach.'*

One implementing partner praised Oxfam's excellent transparency and communications in the Project. They said, *'I would like to acknowledge the transparency of the communication by Oxfam. They communicated well with partners. That's one of the main things that helps build a good relationship.'* They explained that, *'Programs like this will be more sustainable in the future and attract donors if they continue to be transparent like this one.'* They also praised the training that was provided as a part of the Project, including the training on gender. One partner noted that this was a key theme at the reflection workshop indicating the importance of ensuring training covered all aspects of the Project, including the technical issues, so that NGOs could help to address issues that arose. Some partners praised Oxfam's dedication and commitment to managing issues in the field, particularly when using such an unknown technical modality such as blockchain, where knowledge was limited. They noted that the call centre was a key part of Project communications and was managed well.

Another partner stressed that Oxfam's open communication, particularly in relation to reporting and information requirements, including the management of risks, made it a good partner. They shared concerns about the efforts required to maintain institutional knowledge within the organisation if Oxfam were to continue working in CVA and blockchain in the Pacific. They asked, *'How do they keep their body of knowledge relevant so they can actually do this again as quickly as possible, if another event creates another opportunity for cash-based transfer?'*

Oxfam's ways of working contributed to positive sentiments about the potential for future collaboration. One organisation said, *'I have seen a lot of changes in Oxfam: they are well organised and well structured.'* They added *'The effectiveness of the partnership made us want to partner with Oxfam in the future. Relationships built out in the field during implementation outlasted the Project and still persist today.'* They added *'I like the commitment that Oxfam showed to ensure that this Project ran well until the end. They went before the partners and remained long after the partners returned.'* They also commended the approach for other NGOs, based on their experience of this partnership. They are now convinced of the value of using a partnership approach, saying *'I recommend that other NGOs take on the partnership approach that was used during UBC and that we continue to use this partnership approach in the future.'*

## **4.9 Partnerships and institutional change**

Several partners raised issues about the consequences of Oxfam's internal restructure that took place early in the implementation phase of the Project. They expressed views that the restructure had implications for governance, decision-making, reduced personnel and other resources in Oxfam. Some mentioned the contribution of the restructure to lapsed contractual agreements, breaches of contracts and poor due diligence in relation to the selection of implementing partners' capacity to deliver. It is worth noting the impact that internal organisational dynamics can have on external partnership dynamics and Oxfam's own

constraints and challenges of working in partnerships during this time of change. While partners considered these affected Oxfam's role as the lead partner, their overall perception of Oxfam is that its commitment to the partnership approach and its application of partnership principles made a significant contribution to the work of the Project.

## 4.10 The contribution of the MSP to the UBC

Overall, most partners confirmed that the MSP was instrumental in the achievements of the Project. Some indicated that without this approach and the diverse range of implementing partners, the reach of the assistance would have been limited both geographically and from an inclusivity perspective. One partner said, *'I think if Oxfam had not have had the partners, it would not have been a success: they wouldn't have been able to deliver by themselves with such a reach.'* Another partner echoed similar sentiments by saying, *'I think it was better working with all the partners, because trust is important in communities in Vanuatu: the communities know and trust the NGOs.'*

Other partners highlighted that a key part of the Project was their ability to share resources and knowledge with the other participating organisations. For example, one said, *'By the end of the UBC, there were lots of experiences to draw on, challenges to learn about and solutions that we developed together.'* One partner extended this point by expressing the view that, *'The notion of building a program together and the fact that it was a shared effort and there was knowledge and capacity to implement across all partners, was definitely instrumental to the success of the partnership.'*

The partnership approach also contributed to strengthening partners' capacity in relation to the development of technical skills to deliver similar projects in future. For example, one partner said, *'It was designed for a partnership approach to build the capacity of other partners. We certainly have our capacity strengthened.'*

From a technology perspective, one partner indicated that the partnership approach enabled the design and delivery of appropriate technology. The technology partner reflected their rare experience of being able to meet with users of the technology and to work closely with all partners throughout the planning and implementation phase.

# 5. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in Section 4 highlight the general benefits and complexities associated with the MSP approach, as well as specific aspects of this approach for introducing an innovative technology in a complex humanitarian setting in Vanuatu. This section provides brief analysis of these findings for the purpose of suggesting recommendations for Oxfam and other organisations wishing to use this approach in future. It recognises that ‘context is everything’ so seeks to make general comments. While some elements of an MSP approach may be replicable in theory, MSP dynamics are very context-specific, so it is not reasonable to assume that what occurred in Vanuatu during the implementation of the UBC project could be replicated in another setting, at a different time, with different partners.

The size, complexity and innovative nature of the UBC project already suggests there are multiple frames of reference to consider. For example, lessons about ownership, governance, relevance, effectiveness and sustainability as well as perspectives on localisation, decolonisation, inclusion, and cultural relevance all come into play. When these are supplemented by the MSP approach, additional frames of reference are relevant, such as how to successfully navigate competing values and views about many aspects of development, how to respond to different views and agendas for change, as well as the allocation of roles and responsibilities.

The lessons that emerged from this case study may be useful for Oxfam and other organisations using the MSP approach in future in similar contexts. They largely relate to the nuances of applying the partnership principles (described in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 above) in the case of an innovative technology context in Vanuatu, and the subtleties associated with engaging with many organisations, with similar and different interests, over a sustained period.

Overall, in terms of Oxfam’s ‘added value’ as a non-technology organisation, Oxfam successfully mobilised and facilitated a diverse range of organisations, using its reputation, networks and initiative. Its efforts, including its ability to work successfully with diverse organisations, including new types of partners, contributed to the achievement of a successful technology-focused project and to stronger relationships.

## Partnership principles

**Lesson: In a partnership, the determination of particular principles (values and ways of working) relating to the specific context (geographical, organisational, political, time) are important.**

These are best discussed and negotiated at the outset in each case, by the people and organisations involved. Hierarchies, personalities, relationships and existing systems in each organisation are always going to require consideration. Critically, the principles that apply to each partnership need to be developed collectively by the partners in that partnership. The process of developing shared principles enables cultural and political values to be better understood and ‘applied.’ The process also contributes to building respectful and collaborative relationships. In addition, the process contributes to the formulation of words that are then

included formally in documents, often a requirement of donor and formal organisations.

Oxfam found that in the case of existing and established organisational partnerships, many issues can be resolved over time, but there is value in discussing the particular values, principles and ways of working that will apply to each new project, particularly if additional and new partners join. Oxfam staff found there are both opportunities and challenges associated with acting as a convenor, broker and facilitator with multiple organisations, and deepened understanding about the complexities involved.

**Recommendation 1: All new partnerships should allocate time for discussions and negotiations about the degree of shared ownership and specific principles and ways of working that apply in each case, to be documented in customised partnering agreements.**

### **Inclusive partnerships built on trust and respect**

**Lesson: This case study showed that when there are high levels of trust and respect, partnerships can address even highly challenging, complex and new issues, including the introduction of new technology.**

Partners in the Project referred to the trust and respect they experienced as being critical to its success. In addition, the MSP approach meant that organisations which already had trust and respect with their own stakeholders, could extend the benefits of the approach widely at community level. The key message is that people and organisations which partner with each other need to explicitly and deliberately commit to working in inclusive, trusting and respectful ways. For many organisations, this mirrors their interactions with community members. For other organisations, commonly those which do not engage directly with communities, such approaches may be novel and sometimes challenging.

Contemporary humanitarian and development approaches pay considerable attention to the importance of inclusion. This case study highlighted how the MSP approach enabled the Project to include organisations representing a variety of groups, as well as ensure the benefits reached all relevant communities. Including organisations with different worldviews and agendas, particularly local organisations with diverse prior experiences of collaboration with international organisations, inevitably means that partners need to be open to new ways of thinking and working.

**Recommendation 2:**

**Multi-stakeholder partnerships need to consider ways to build and support trust and respectful interactions which are culturally relevant to each context.**

**Recommendation 3:**

**Organisations which represent relevant segments of the population need to be invited to join multi-sector partnerships to maximise inclusion.**

### **Partnership negotiations at the project design stage**

**Lesson: The nature of partners' roles and responsibilities in a Project influences their levels of interaction, engagement and interest at the different stages.**

The Project proposal submitted for funding to donors in June 2020 reflected discussions between Oxfam and many organisations that were involved in multiple discussions within the VCWG beforehand. The document confirms that organisations were invited to participate as partners with Oxfam through these discussions. The level of detail in the Project proposal document is impressive given that a partnership approach was proposed, suggesting an interest in more innovative, iterative, flexible and responsive ways of working. This level of detail confirms that a great deal of interaction occurred with each partner even before funding was approved. Oxfam invested considerable staff time and used high-level skills in negotiation and collaboration for this purpose. The quality of interactions with those partners who accepted the invitation to collaborate with Oxfam before the Project proposal was finalised, appears to have contributed to high quality interactions during implementation.

In any collaborative project, setting a shared vision is particularly important for maximising the quality of engagement. Setting such a vision requires deep listening, respectful conversations and negotiations, and cannot be imposed by one organisation on another. The Project proposal states: 'Resulting from these discussions, stakeholders have all agreed and come to a consensus that cash assistance is urgently required and that the majority will be seeking to support a cash response, based on a partner mapping conducted in May, on the condition that Oxfam can provide technical leadership.' (p7). In the Project, a great deal of partners' attention was paid to the criteria for distribution of CVA activities and the different responsibilities of each partner in the distribution process. In retrospect, partners report a high level of satisfaction that they were included in these types of discussions. Interestingly, relatively little mention was made of their interest in the higher-level goals associated with partnership and sustainable change. This suggests that when partnering with organisations which are only expected to be involved in specific aspects of implementation, it cannot be expected they will have an interest in playing a role in shaping the Project overall.

In practical terms, when discussions are being held with partners in the early stages of a new Project, it is not necessary to assume that all partners want to be involved in deep partnerships, particularly government organisations. Many may be happy to collaborate but are not necessarily interested in shaping or influencing the Project at a strategic level, having ownership of overall benefits or carrying risks. This applies to organisations which may need to be consulted or engaged on particular procedural or compliance issues, such as financial institutions.

#### **Recommendation 4:**

**Partnership negotiations need to cover only relevant aspects of cooperation to determine the roles and responsibilities of each partner.**

#### **Partnerships in relation to innovative technology**

**Lesson: When a project introduces an innovation that is not understood by partners, this challenges the extent to which partners can participate.**

The UBC Project introduced substantially new concepts, technology and ways of working. This inevitably involved risks, both to the partners involved and in terms of the potential for achieving sustainable benefits. The blockchain technology had already been trialled in a limited number of locations in Vanuatu with a small number of vendors and citizens who benefited from the cash transfers. The upscaling of this approach and the MSP approach brought new risks.

The fact that new technologies were the focus of the Project meant that partners needed to be committed to a 'learning by doing' approach, which involved a high degree of trust in Oxfam's expertise (see Section 4.8 above). All partners noted that their own learning was a feature of

their experience of the UBC project. The extent to which they engaged with the learning experience varied between organisations and it is not clear how they may take their learning into future collaborations, or future CVA activities. However, most partners noted how much they valued the training provided by Oxfam, and Oxfam is clearly interested in providing such training in similar and future activities of this nature. In the interests of sustainable benefits, such training needs to be supported by ongoing reflection, leadership support, risk management and careful monitoring.

The use of new technology also involved a degree of risk taking, which meant partners needed to be made aware of particular risks associated with their involvement, as well as broader risks associated with the Project itself. This awareness was needed during the design and implementation stages. Oxfam allocated a great deal of resources, particularly time and staff, to raising awareness about the technology, the opportunities for collaboration and the benefits. One partner indicated that risk management is a key factor in future funding opportunities in this space.

It is clear at the time of the case study that Government of Vanuatu officials had mixed views about the technology and its place in Vanuatu, particularly in relation to compliance with existing legislation, policies, systems and structures related to banking, reporting and other aspects of governance<sup>17</sup>.

#### **Recommendation 5:**

**Partnerships that introduce innovative technology need to allocate additional funds, staff and time for supported and ongoing training for partners' staff on various aspects of implementation, particularly for sustainability purposes.**

#### **Selecting partners and formalising partnerships**

**Lesson: It is critically important to ensure relevant government organisations are appropriately engaged in a project of this nature.**

Given the large number of partners involved in the UBC project, considerable effort was required in the selection, inclusion and documentation arrangements required. Several interviewees mentioned concerns about the large number of partners. Several noted there were times when contractual or partnership documents had expired and were not renewed in a timely manner. Some mentioned the time that is needed for agreements to be negotiated, including through their own hierarchies.

Mention was made of the challenges associated with documentation when it came to the need for flexible, adaptive, iterative approaches. Some partners mentioned concerns about expectations of community-based organisations which may not have sufficient organisational systems in place to take on responsibilities and externally driven reporting requirements. In general, partnerships of this complexity require dedicated attention to all aspects of organisational partners' roles and responsibilities.

Most stakeholders noted the critical importance of ensuring relevant government organisations are appropriately engaged in a project of this nature, but that this was an area of difficulty for this Project. This is particularly relevant given the objectives of the Project included supporting

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<sup>17</sup> The Case Study review team were informed by Oxfam during the process of finalizing this report that the Government of Vanuatu has developed legislation that will address blockchain in future.

the use of blockchain technology in national humanitarian responses, and therefore official government systems and processes. Relationships between NGOs, particularly INGOs, and governments can be challenging in many contexts, but there is value in ensuring senior officials have a 'seat at the table' from the outset. Ensuring that existing government regulations, policies and procedures are complied with, as well as contribute to raising awareness and potential interest in changes to these, were important aspects of the Project's implementation. Coherence and interaction with government was also a key theme which was explored in the UBC Independent Evaluation (see Annex 5).

In Vanuatu, challenges related to this aspect of the Project contributed to some problems when it came to operations at the provincial level, requiring considerable extra effort and new relationships to be established. Once engaged, provincial authorities played a key role in the Project's ability to reach communities. As they will deal with the longer-term consequences of changes in the way communities are involved in future humanitarian responses, their engagement was key.

#### **Recommendation 6:**

**Projects which seek sustainable and systemic changes at national level, including in coordination of humanitarian responses, require engagement with and support from relevant government organisations.**

### **Partnership health and governance**

**Lesson: Maintaining the quality of partnerships, beyond the monitoring of task completion, is important.**

**Lesson: Governance systems for partnerships generally require shared development of governance principles by the partners.**

This case study confirmed that many organisations were involved in a wide range of activities and processes, requiring considerable energy, commitment and efforts by many people. Hundreds of meetings were held between staff of partners. These meetings covered huge numbers of processes, such as designing each step, considering each issue (from inclusion to communications), and responding to new challenges. All the partners valued the regular interaction, the openness of Oxfam to listening and respecting their contributions and the commitment to a shared approach.

There are some simple ways to give regular attention to partnership health, to ensure that the partnerships can be the best possible. Partnership health checks can for example, provide opportunities for partners to talk about the level of existing trust, the quality of communications, and the opportunities available to strengthen the partnership in the next period.

The inclusion of many partners in the UBC project meant that governance processes became particularly important. The different levels of partnership intensity described in Figure 1 suggest that different levels of governance intensity may also be necessary – not all organisations seek to be involved in governance of all aspects of projects. Organisations with the most vested interest in the benefits and with the most to lose in terms of risk, are likely to be more interested in project governance systems than those with relatively low levels of ownership and engagement, but other factors also play a role – the degree of formality and the size of organisations for example.

Governance systems for partnerships generally require shared development of governance

principles by the partners. This can be challenging when different types of partners (private sector, public sector, formal and informal) are engaged. In addition, governance of MSP projects requires considerable time and other resources, such as funding to attend meetings or travel to project locations. Many partners in the UBC project reported that they valued regular operational meetings and the opportunity to build collaboration and understanding, as well as contribute ideas to the Project over time. Several noted that periodic high-level governance meetings did not occur as expected for various reasons. While no partners seemed overly concerned by this, it may affect longer-term organisational engagement in similar projects in future.

Partners in the UBC project suggested that planning for effective governance needs to be undertaken during the early planning and design phase, but that some degree of flexibility is likely to be needed over time. For example, at the outset, attention paid to the VCWG suggested that this mechanism could play a role in project governance, but over time it became less suitable for this purpose. While partners valued ongoing interactions at the operational level between all partners involved in the Project, during project implementation, several noted that high-level governance interactions, e.g. between senior officials from partner organisations on strategic aspects, did not take place as expected. One partner indicated that this could have been due to the internal restructuring and reduced resources available for governance and coordination. If senior officials are involved in partnerships, it is more likely that the benefits of partnerships can be institutionalised and sustained in the longer term, rather than lost when individual program officials leave organisations.

Governance also includes risk management, oversight of communications such as agreement on key messages for partnership promotions and reporting, as well as other aspects of the Project's approach. Partners valued Oxfam's efforts and processes in these areas.

#### **Recommendation 7:**

**When using multi-stakeholder partnerships, specific attention should be paid to monitoring the health of partnerships and maintaining their quality.**

#### **Recommendation 8:**

**Partnerships require dedicated governance efforts and systems to contribute to both partnership success, strategic objectives and the likelihood that organisational partners will sustain benefits.**

### **Supporting organisational capacity**

*'I am grateful for the partnership and Oxfam itself for helping me gain skills.'*

*'After the 6 months response, the partners have gained skills and knowledge on CTP. It is important that these skills and knowledge are transferred to partners and community members.'*

**Lesson: As is the case in all aspects of organisational capacity, systems need to be in place for maximising the retention of skilled and knowledgeable staff, orienting new staff, supporting ongoing professional development of staff, and quality supervision and support for new staff.**

Organisations tend to change over time in terms of various aspects of capacity. For example, leaders and staff leave or are appointed, so organisations lose or gain expertise and knowledge over time. Particularly among INGOs, staff turnover can affect the retention of knowledge about specific ideas, topics, systems and practices, as well as networks and relationships. In the UBC



project context, given the large numbers of organisations involved and the use of a new technology, partners' capacity is a particularly important issue. Partners noted that the UBC project contributed to their understanding of new ways of working and the blockchain technology. The UBC project required partners, including the various Oxfam offices, to support their staff to participate in regular and ongoing learning, project communications and additional processes associated with project activities.

The staff of organisations which partnered in the UBC project valued the opportunity to learn about both partnership approaches and the blockchain technology. They consistently confirmed their interest in the training provided. They also sought ways to support organisational capacity to apply these approaches in future. In the Vanuatu context, there were several examples where individuals with specific skills and interests in this area moved between organisations, thereby keeping the skills in the sector.

**Recommendation 9:**

**Partner organisations need to enable their staff to use partnership approaches, including through training and leadership support, and consider how to retain staff with these skills.**

## **Annex 4 Stakeholder Interview List**

The following organisations and named people (where consent provided) participated in the development of this case study. Melinda also spoke with several people (marked with \*) in her complementary role as panel facilitator at an Oxfam Vanuatu Advocacy Workshop in July 2022.

### **Vanuatu Implementing Partners**

Further Arts – Vivian Obed

Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce/Vanuatu Business Resilience Committee – Maximillien Zacharie

Vanuatu Christian Council – Sam Blondell

\*Church of Christ Santo – Russel Tari

\*Vanuatu Society for Persons with Disabilities – Ashiana Basil

### **Vanuatu Government Partners**

\*Department of Local Authorities (Tafea Province) – Jo lautim

\*Department of Local Authorities (Torba Province) – Reynold Surmat (NB Torba not in Project)

### **Technology Partners**

Emerging Impact – Sandra Uwantege Hart (formerly Oxfam Vanuatu)

Sempo – Tristian Cole

Digicel – Kristel Tingzon

ViewPx – George Tasso

### **International NGOs**

International Federation of Red Cross (Vanuatu) – Linda Peter, Tevita Gideon and Philipah Kalontas

World Vision International (Vanuatu) – Two Representatives

### **Other organisations**

\*Barret and Partners – Melani Spann

### **Oxfam (Vanuatu, Pacific, Australia)**

Oxfam Vanuatu – Anita Samana

Oxfam Vanuatu – Kalua Salerua

Oxfam Vanuatu – Steven Bough

Oxfam Australia – Sem Mabuwa

Oxfam Australia – Representative

### **Donor**

## **Annex 5 Secondary data list**

### **Reports**

Holt, C & Oxfam (2019), Vanuatu Cash Transfer Feasibility Assessment, Oxfam in Vanuatu. February 2019

Oxfam (2019), Unblocked Cash: Piloting Accelerated Cash Transfer Delivery in Vanuatu, Research Report: October 2019.

Oxfam (2019), End Line Survey Report – Cash Transfers for Rapid Livelihoods Recovery of Volcano-Displaced Families in Vanuatu. Data Collection March 2019. Report prepared April 2019.

Oxfam (2020), Call-Based Survey: Vulnerable Livelihoods and Income Impact, COVID-19 and TC Harold, Survey Report, September 2020.

Oxfam (2020), Unblocked Cash – TC Harold and COVID-19 Recovery and Response Program Quarterly Monitoring Report. Time frame: 15 October – 22 December 2020.

Sempo, Unblocked Cash Transfer. TC Harold and COVID-19 Response Overview. Sanma, Shefa and Tafea.

Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2020), Vanuatu Economic Outlook Report

HCDI (2022), Independent Evaluation of Oxfam UBC Project 2021 – 2022

UBC Endline Report, Oxfam, September 2022

### **Case Studies**

HCDI (2022), Empowerment of Female Vendors, UBC Case Study 1. Prepared 15 May 2022

HCDI (2022), Tanna, UBC Case Study 1. Prepared 30 May 2022

### **Design Documents**

AHP C19 Pacific Package Proposal\_OxfamCVA\_final\_26062020

AHP Rapid Activation Proposal Template\_TC Harold\_2020-04-11

Oxfam AHP C19 Vanuatu CVA EXT Budget 30032021 AHPSU feedback updated

Oxfam AHP C19 Vanuatu CVA Extension proposal (180321 to AHPSU)

Oxfam AHP C19 Vanuatu MEAL Framework 18032021

Worksheet in AHP Rapid Activation Proposal Template\_TC Harold\_2020-04-11

### **Videos by Oxfam**

Blockchain and how it can transform humanitarian cash transfers in Vanuatu

Jerusalema Dance Challenge

Unblocked Cash – the Documentary



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