

Oxfam GB Country Learning Reviews Guidelines

Country Learning Reviews are part of Oxfam's developing Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) System. Country Learning Reviews take place annually, and link to the wider MEL system, which includes Monitoring Reviews, Programme Evaluations, and Regional Learning Reviews.

1. What is a Country Learning Review? (Definition)

A Country Learning Review is an annual process of reflection and learning at a country level in order to improve the quality of our programme. It is a chance to stop and think about what we are doing, how we are working and what effect we are having through our programmes.

2. What are Country Learning Reviews for? (Purpose)

Country Learning Reviews provide a space for country teams and relevant stakeholders to reflect on the 'burning issue' or critical success factor for the country at that point in time. They support improvements to the quality of our work by helping teams to reflect on and learn from our programmes and their effectiveness, and using this learning to make decisions about programmes, strategy and direction. This ensures that what we do is informed by a solid and shared understanding of our work, the country contexts we work in, and the value we add as an organisation in those contexts.

3. What does a Country Learning Review look like? (Design)

Country Learning Reviews will typically be a 2-3 day event that brings together programme teams and relevant stakeholders¹ to reflect on a key issue for the country at that moment. Country teams will decide the focus of their Country Learning Review, led by the Country Director, and will manage the design and delivery of an appropriate process. In order to ensure coherence with decisions about policy, strategy and direction being made at other levels in the organisation, this should happen in conversation with regions.

The focus of Country Learning Reviews will vary, as will the processes that countries use to support learning around these different issues. No two Country Learning Reviews will look the same. However, as a minimum they should meet the following requirements:

a. Promote inclusive learning

Country Learning Reviews should create an inclusive learning environment, and engage as many staff, partners and other stakeholders as is necessary to encourage meaningful discussions and to build a full, rounded picture from different perspectives on the programme. Non-programme staff, partners, beneficiaries, and external challengers can all help us to better understand the programme and how relevant and effective it is in the context. "It is important to create a safe environment for active participation at the start, to give the group encouragement and license to think creatively, ensure confidentiality and commit[] to try to operate without any notion of hierarchy in the room. The environment becomes conducive for creative thinking when people are assured that fresh, possibly half-baked ideas would not immediately be turned into plans."²

b. Build from evidence

Discussions and questions for Country Learning Reviews should be based upon evidence on a critical success factor or 'burning issue' for the country at that moment in time – considering what is working, what is not working, why and how – in order to improve our ability to bring about positive and lasting change for people living in poverty. While it is possible to overwhelm participants with too much information, it is important to have enough to be able to move beyond opinions and anecdotal information to a discussion that continually refers to data from our programme and/or evidence from our context.

c. Link to decisions about our programme going forward

While the Country Learning Review itself is not a forum for making major strategic decisions, it feeds learning into decisions about policy, strategy and direction. To maximise their utility, Country Learning Reviews should link in to ongoing country level processes, and form an integral part of the constant cycle of reflection, learning and action necessary for running effective programmes. While it may not be possible to know in advance what outputs you will get from a Country Learning Review, it is important to identify clear (and realistic) objectives, and to be explicit about what the learning will feed into and how.

¹ May include staff, partners, beneficiaries or external contributors at programme, country or regional level

² Lan Mercado, while acting Regional Programme Manager for South Asia

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4. How can Country Learning Reviews be used? (Use)

Countries can use Country Learning Reviews to consider any 'burning issue' on which there is a need to reflect and learn at a country level at any time in the year. For example, they may be used as an opportunity to:

- Support cross-programme learning from past successes (or problems) in sectors, programmes, strategies, policies etc.;
- Strengthen ways of working within and between teams and partners
- Challenge ourselves and the assumptions that underpin our work in a country;
- Update our contextual analysis and asking if we are fit for purpose – ensuring that the programme remains relevant by reflecting on the external context, the programme, our niche or value-added at country level etc.;
- Frame a new country strategy or review the implementation of an existing strategy;
- Gain a shared understanding among staff and partners of a new or revised thematic focus, technical issue or way of working;
- Inform programme policy

Issues that countries have chosen for their Country Learning Reviews include: the implications of a new organisational policy for the country (ie/ the partnership policy); the need to develop or review a country strategy; or the need to consider how changing trends in our external environment affect our work.