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Analysis of an Oxfam international campaign on agriculture in India 2004 – 2005

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Abstract

From 2002 until 2006, the international development agency Oxfam ran a major global advocacy campaign called 'Make Trade Fair'. This paper looks at one small aspect of that campaign, which involved lobbying the Indian Government to hold to its position in trade negotiations in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in the lead up to a Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in December 2005. The paper looks at what was and was not achieved in that campaign in India, and identifies the factors that contributed to, or limited, its success. It also looks at the role that Oxfam played as an active participant in this advocacy in the South.

About the author

The author is Advocacy Coordinator at Oxfam Australia, one of the affiliated organisations that makes up the Oxfam International confederation. As well as being responsible for the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign in Australia, he was also a member of international Oxfam bodies involved in running the global campaign, and of the Oxfam team that supervised this campaign in India. In 2007 he was a Practitioner Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London.

The ‘Make Trade Fair’ campaign¹

Oxfam International is a confederation of 13 non-government development organisations based in 12 countries around the world, that all carry the name ‘Oxfam’.² Most are based in the North, particularly in Europe, but there are a few emerging Southern Oxfams, including an Oxfam India, which although small at the moment will eventually take over all the programs in India of the other Oxfams.³ These Oxfam affiliates work with over 3,000 partner organisations in more than 100 developing countries to find “lasting solutions to poverty, suffering and injustice”.⁴

As many of the causes of poverty and injustice are global in nature, the 13 Oxfam affiliates believe they can achieve greater impact through working together. Hence wherever possible their advocacy is done jointly. One manifestation of this is the large coordinated international campaigns that they run from time to time on a particular issue of concern - campaigns in which all affiliates and field offices around the world are saying the same thing at the same time, via the media, popular campaigning, lobbying, etc. This means having agreed policies and public positions on issues, shared campaigning and advocacy strategies, coordinated media activities, etc.

In April 2002, the largest of these joint campaigns was launched in 25 countries around the world, under the slogan ‘Make Trade Fair’. Its message was that trade has the potential to lift millions out of chronic poverty, but that potential is not being realised because the rules and practices of trade are rigged in the interests of the richer and more powerful nations and their trading companies, and to the disadvantage of the poor. But trade is a big and multifarious subject and the issues involved quite complex, and so in order to make the campaign more concrete and accessible, it was decided to highlight certain examples of trade that illustrated the central message. The examples chosen were the international trade in pharmaceuticals, coffee, ready-made

garments and agricultural products. Hence within the overall 'Make Trade Fair' campaign there were sub-campaigns on particular illustrative aspects of trade.

The design and overall supervision of the campaign was in the hands of a Trade Campaign Project Group, which consisted of representatives of Oxfam affiliates and regions as well as specialists such as media and popular campaigning people. In the beginning when all the key decisions were being made, individual regions such as South Asia had no direct representation on this group. There was just one person representing all of them. Eventually however each region including South Asia had its own representative.

The sub-campaign on the trade in agricultural goods focused on the negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) around the rules for trading in agricultural products. The aim was to change these rules, which were very much to the advantage of the richer and more influential nations in the WTO, and threatened the livelihood on millions of poor and vulnerable farmers in the South. This was to be done by lobbying the governments involved, and backing this up with popular campaigning. The popular campaigning aspect focused on the gathering of millions of signatures from people all over the world to a massive international petition. This was called the 'Big Noise' petition as it was supposed to represent a loud and forceful cry from the peoples of the world for the rules and practices of trade to be made fairer. This was taken up in scores of countries around the world and, by December 2005, had gathered nearly 18 million signatures.

Agricultural trade and the WTO

Within the world of trade, it is agricultural trade in particular that is crucial to poverty reduction. More than 80 percent of the world's poor people live in rural areas, and ensuring that agriculture works for them must be at the heart of the international trade agenda. But the liberalisation of trade by the WTO⁵ and other international bodies is putting more and more peasant farmers into direct competition with imports produced by farmers in rich countries who have access to capital, machinery, hi-tech inputs and government subsidies. The result could be millions of poor farmers in the South being unable to compete in their domestic markets and being forced to leave their land for uncertain futures in ever more crowded urban slums. Whilst cheap imports do mean cheaper food for consumers, both urban and rural, this is more than offset by the potential undermining of rural economies on which the majority of the population depend. Displaced farmers and destitute rural people will have difficulty buying such food, no matter how cheap it is.

Exacerbating the problem is the dumping of subsidised agricultural products by European and American producers onto export markets. The European Union (EU) and United States (US) governments heavily subsidise their agricultural producers, and this has led to overproduction. These surpluses have traditionally been disposed of by exporting them, at artificially low prices. But this undermines exporters from other countries, including Southern countries who do not (or cannot) subsidise their farmers, by lowering world prices and unfairly taking export markets. Because of trade liberalisation, these subsidised goods are increasingly able to be imported into Southern countries, undermining local farmers who are trying to sell their products on the domestic market.

The rules that governments follow with respect to international trade (tariffs, quotas, etc) are set via a process of inter-governmental negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Most of these take place at the government

official level at the WTO headquarters in Geneva, but every two years the politicians become involved when Trade Ministers of the WTO member countries meet together at a Ministerial Conference. It is at these conferences that new agreements are concluded and signed. There are now around 150 members of the WTO, the majority of them Southern countries, big and small. But the negotiations tend to be dominated by a few larger trading nations, which until recently meant the US, EU, Japan and a few other Northern countries. However this is now changing as larger Southern countries such as Brazil, India and China begin to exert their influence. At the 2003 Ministerial Conference a significant development took place when a group of Southern countries got together to form what was called the 'Group of Twenty' or G20 and lobbied jointly.⁶ This was a group that could to some extent match the influence of the US and EU, and its appearance changed the balance of negotiating power within the WTO. India is a key player in the G20.

In 2004 and 2005, Oxfam's sub-campaign on agriculture within the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign was focused on the negotiations around the WTO Agreement on Agriculture and, in particular, the all-important Ministerial Conference scheduled for December 2005 in Hong Kong. Its strategies included:

- Highlighting the 'rigged rules' that allowed the US and EU to continue to subsidise their producers and dump agricultural surpluses on export markets, and the hypocrisy of Northern governments that insisted that Southern countries open their markets while resisting the opening of their own.
- Producing and launching in the media a number of briefing papers that documented these abuses.
- Encouraging the assertiveness of Southern countries in the WTO by providing them with documented examples of unfair rules and practices by Northern countries and the arguments to counter their negotiating positions.

- Collecting millions of signatures in the North and South on the 'Big Noise' petition, to be presented to world leaders at the Hong Kong ministerial meeting.

Determining priorities in India

In South Asia there are a number of Oxfam affiliates operating, whose development assistance programs are run separately, but whose advocacy work in the region is done jointly, under the leadership of an Oxfam Regional Strategic Team. In 2004 the Regional Strategic Team decided to take up this international sub-campaign, in particular in India and Bangladesh, because of the importance of small-scale agriculture in those countries. But agriculture and agricultural trade are very broad issues, and in order to determine exactly what they should be focusing on, the Regional Strategic Team decided to hold a series of consultation workshops with a selection of the local organisations with whom the Oxfams work, plus other academics and experts.⁷ In late 2004 Oxfam offices in the two countries organised a series of one-day consultation workshops to which were invited representatives from relevant partner organisations, research institutions and farmers' organisations. Four such consultations took place in India (in Bhubaneswar, Lucknow, Bangalore and Ahmedabad), and one in Bangladesh, culminating in a regional conference covering both India and Bangladesh in Dhaka in January 2005.

Each of the consultations involved enthusiastic and often spirited discussion. In India the issues raised tended to be local ones about the policies and practices of state and federal governments and their support (or lack of) for small-scale farmers, rather than about international trade. Because the emphasis in India from the time of Ghandi has been on national self-sufficiency, international trade has not, until recently, received much attention, including from Indian NGOs. For many of these it was a new issue whose relevance to their rural development work was only now becoming evident. While some were well aware of what was happening in the WTO and its relevance, many were not. Despite this, however, some issues did emerge from the consultations that were related to trade, for example:

- the fall in the world prices for agricultural commodities;

- domestic and export subsidies provided by some Northern countries to their farmers;
- Regional Trade Agreements that could have significant negative impacts on the livelihoods of farmers;
- New ingenious non-tariff barriers that were emerging in the North to replace tariffs, such as quality standards that Indian farmers were unable to meet;
- ‘Contract farming’ (buyers contracting to purchase a farmers crop in advance for a pre-determined price) and the increasing role of transnational corporations in farming.⁸

This latter issue emerged as a major area of concern. ‘Contract farming’ offers several advantages to farmers, most notably a guaranteed income from his crop, provided that the contract and the price offered are fair. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, and farmers are instead exploited. It was decided that the ‘Make Trade Fair’ campaign in South Asia should focus on ‘contract farming’ as well as on the WTO negotiations. A need was also identified for additional research to support the campaign on particular crops produced in the region, and a research program was initiated. The Center for Trade and Development (CENTAD), a Delhi based organisation originally established by Oxfam but now independent, commissioned and published a number of relevant working papers, including one on the theory and practice of ‘contract farming’ in India, which received a positive response. Oxfam itself also commissioned several crop-specific pieces of research in India and Bangladesh.

Pressure from the international campaign

At the international level, the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign was now focused almost exclusively on influencing the WTO negotiations. In particular it (together with most Southern governments) wanted an agreement that would force the US and EU to eliminate their agricultural subsidies, and would allow Southern governments the power to decide the extent and pace of opening of their agricultural markets. The campaign was focused on lobbying in the North to pressure the US and EU governments, and lobbying in Geneva (where the WTO is based) and in Southern capitals to encourage the assertiveness of developing countries in the negotiations.

India as a leader of the G20 was at this stage playing a vital role. Hence the organisers of the international campaign were very keen for Oxfam in India to focus on lobbying the government in Delhi on the WTO agreement. The Indian Government's position was in line with Oxfam's, so all that was required was for it to hold firm and not give in to pressure from the US, EU and others. This would be critical at the forthcoming WTO Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong in December 2005 where it appeared key decisions were about to be made.

From time to time the Trade Ministers of the G20 meet together to work out common positions and to strategise and plan. In March 2005, two months after the Dhaka regional consultation, one such meeting of the G20 was held in Delhi, hosted by the Indian Government. This was important enough for the international organisers of the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign to send one of their key Geneva-based lobbyists to Delhi to assist the local team. This was Celine Charveriat, who had overall responsibility for the global campaign's policy and strategy. She also had unique knowledge of the WTO negotiation process through her network of contacts in Geneva. Working with her at the G20 meeting was another key advocate, Delhi-based Dr. Samar Verma, head of Oxfam trade advocacy in South Asia. These two lobbied strenuously at the G20 meeting.

The Oxfam advocacy staff in India took the opportunity of Charveriat's presence in Delhi to sit down with her and map out a detailed work-plan for the campaign in India up until the Hong Kong Ministerial. Amongst other things she stressed that local staff in India needed to be continuously lobbying the government in Delhi and gathering intelligence from government officials and key business groups in order to inform the global campaigning plans. She also stressed the need for at least one major popular campaigning event in India in the run-up the WTO Ministerial meeting that would capture public attention and generate media attention locally, nationally and hopefully internationally.

The resultant plan

In May 2005 the South Asia team running the local campaign met and took the decision that, because of its importance internationally, they would focus on this short-term WTO agenda leading up to the Hong Kong meeting, and would postpone the longer term campaigning on issues brought forward by the consultation process, including 'contract farming'. A concrete campaign plan for 2005 was put in place whose aim was to have the Indian Government:

- support changes to the WTO Agreement on Agriculture that will allow developing countries the power to decide the pace and extent of liberalisation of agricultural trade, so as to promote food security, livelihood security and rural livelihoods.
- maintain the unity and increase the assertiveness of the Group of 20;
- lead by example by allowing market access to imports from Least Developed Countries (e.g. Bangladesh).⁹

As well as producing research and lobbying the government, the campaign would have a program of popular campaigning to demonstrate public support for the protection of farmers' livelihoods. This public campaign would be branded 'Make Trade Fair', not Oxfam, and would include:

- A photo exhibition on the lives of farmers, to be launched in October 2005 along with four case studies on cotton, sugar, oilseed and dairy products.
- Three traveling 'road-shows' in three different states, that would travel through the countryside explaining the issues around trade liberalisation to farmers and rural people and gathering signatures for the 'Big Noise' petition to be presented to world leaders at the Hong Kong meeting.
- A regional 'Make Trade Fair' website.
- TV spots and especially composed songs.

- ‘White Band Day’ in December, a special day of action coinciding with an international day in which as many people as possible would wear a white arm band with the slogan ‘Make Poverty History’.

(However in the end the website, TV spots and campaign songs did not eventuate).

Popular campaigning in India

A central feature of the popular campaign was to be the traveling 'road-shows'. But because Oxfam in India had no experience of such activities, it was decided to sub-contract the running of the 'road-shows' to Indian NGOs that had a mass base and experience of this type of popular campaigning at a grassroots level. Exploratory discussions were begun with India's largest civil society network, the Voluntary Action Network of India (VANI), but it declined to be involved. One NGO approached also declined because of a fundamental disagreement with Oxfam's reformist views on the WTO. Eventually four were selected:

- Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants Society (CECOEDECON), based in Rajasthan.
- Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) a development NGO that works in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh..
- Covenant Centre for Development (CCD) based in Tamil Nadu.
- Ekta Parishad, a Gandhian organisation that works in eight different states.

Oxfam also hired the Delhi-based Centre for Advocacy and Research to do the media work around the road-shows and other events.

In October and November 2005, the 'road-shows' took place, traveling through parts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu staging theatrical shows, giving talks and collecting signatures. In Rajasthan for example, sixty 'Make Trade Fair' campaigners and volunteers from CECOEDECON traveled through the desert in a procession of camels, visiting villages as they went, using village level meetings (chaupal) as a means of getting the message across to rural people. People took these meetings seriously and the presence of village level functionaries gave the events a certain status. The first few meetings were small affairs - but as the word spread, subsequent meetings attracted larger groups of people including women.¹⁰ A big attraction for the farmers

and their families was the 'Make Trade Fair' street theatre, whose satirical entertainment the audiences enjoyed immensely, as they heard about such things as the difference in subsidies given to farmers in rich countries compared to farmers in India. Although rural people in a drought-prone state like Rajasthan do not necessarily understand issues of global trade, they are very aware of the impact that government policies have on their situation. During the course of the road-show about 6,000 people in Rajasthan signed up to the Big Noise petition calling on governments to make trade fair.¹¹

The messages that the campaign hoped to convey during these road-shows were both simple and complex. The simple message was summed up in the 'Make Trade Fair' slogan - farmers should get a fair deal from the sale and trade of their produce. This was easily understood by all and readily taken up. The more complex message, about WTO rules and the need for governments to be allowed to use tariffs and quotas to protect local farmers from cheap imports, was not always readily understood by farmers, and indeed in some cases not understood by the partner organisations either. Oxfam was not in a position to control what was being said on placards and elsewhere during the road-shows, and in some cases stray message crept in, including at times an anti-WTO message, which was definitely not Oxfam's position. In December 2005, just after the road-shows had commenced, a staff member from the Oxfam office in Delhi observed one of the road-show rallies:

In my recent visit to a rally in Madhya Pradesh I observed that, though the umbrella framework is of course 'Make Trade Fair' and the spirit behind the slogans and the demand of the farmers is indeed Power to Decide, in letters or a popular slogan uniformity seems to be missing. Rather 'Agriculture at Stake' or Kheti Kisani Khatre Mein seems to be picking up. We need to be watchful on this and must ensure through research efforts and the popular activities that the essence of Power to Decide remain intact. Also, state rallies suggests as if the campaign is anti-WTO and for trade without the WTO.¹²

As well as the road-shows there was also a large open-air concert at Hamswadhani Theatre in Delhi, featuring celebrity singer Lucky Ali. Organised by Oxfam and the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign in conjunction with a Delhi University college and event organisers Seher, it was originally scheduled for late November but was subsequently postponed because of a security scare; road closures by the police meant that the venue was inaccessible. After much frantic re-organising, it was held instead on 10 December. Braving the winter chill, nearly 10,000 eager fans turned up to hear Lucky Ali, and every available space in the open-air theatre was filled, including the aisles and stairs. The concert was introduced by a Make Trade Fair film, 'On the Road to Hong Kong'. When Lucky came on stage he talked about the campaign and the issues, and urged the cheering audience to sign up to the Big Noise. When he started singing one of his hits, the crowd went wild, and for the next two hours, he entertained them with his performance, which included inviting people to come up and sign with him on the stage. At the end, after an encore, he publicly signed the Big Noise petition.¹³

WTO Ministerial Meeting

By this stage the publicity and lobbying was clearly having an impact on the Indian government. Just before they left for Hong Kong, the entire trade negotiation team from the Ministry of Commerce spent a full day at a conference on trade organised by Oxfam and CENTAD. This was unprecedented and represented a whole new attitude by government officials towards NGOs and what they had to say.

A few days after the concert, a meeting was organised with Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, the political head of India's trade negotiating team, just before he left for Hong Kong. At the meeting he was presented with the Big Noise petition with over six million signatures on it from all over India, handed over in the form of a placard by Ramakrishna Choudhary, a farmer from Rajasthan. The petition asked the Indian Government to influence decision-

makers at the WTO to make trade fair for millions of farmers in India who are badly affected by post-liberalisation policies, and for millions more people who depend on agriculture worldwide. The Minister in his response assured us that the interests of small and marginal farmers were of prime importance to the country, and under no circumstances would they be compromised. He added that he was aware that Indian farmers were not in a position to compete with the governments of the US and EU, which heavily subsidise their agriculture.

From 13 to 18 December 2005, trade ministers and officials from 150 countries met in Hong Kong to thrash out a series of agreements concerning the conduct of trade in various types of goods, including agriculture. As well as official government delegations from these countries, thousands of people from civil society groups around the world attended (including a large number from Hong Kong itself) who were busy lobbying, talking to the media, and demonstrating in the streets. Amongst these attendees was a large delegation of staff from the various Oxfams around the world, including a small number from India. There were also two people from Ekta Parishad and one from CCD, who were involved in the popular campaigning activities in the streets of Hong Kong. The Oxfam delegation, which included lobbyists, policy experts and media liaison people, worked extensively behind the scenes with a range of Southern governments to strengthen their influence in the negotiations. At the same time, its media spokespersons (of various nationalities and languages) attempted to get its message across to a wide audience and worked with a broad network of partners and allies to bring civil society pressure on participating governments. At a meeting of 90 Southern governments during the Ministerial Conference, the full Big Noise petition, with 17.8 million signatures from countries all around the world, was presented to Pascal Lamy, the Director General of the WTO.¹⁴

In the event, the negotiations in Hong Kong failing to deliver much for farmers. Developing countries had to fight a rear-guard action simply to keep some of their issues on the table. They were put in the difficult position of either

accepting a deal that was seriously flawed from their point of view, or being blamed for the failure of the negotiations. Small progress on some aspects of the agreement on agriculture was more than offset by damaging proposals on trade in manufactured goods and services. On agriculture, the agreement included a welcome commitment that developing countries would have the right to protect a small number of products of vital importance to poor farmers (Special Products) and that these would be self-selected by the developing country. There was also a pledge by the US and EU to eliminate their agricultural subsidies by 2013, but this only applied to export subsidies and not to the other more damaging forms. In the EU for example, export subsidies account for only 3 or 4 percent of its overall agricultural support. The deal did not offer significant cuts to rich countries' domestic subsidies, nor did it propose tightening the disciplines on allowable payments. And there was no guarantee that Southern countries would gain significantly greater access to Northern markets.

What the campaign achieved

The Indian Government held firm at the WTO

The central aim of the campaign in the lead up to the Hong Kong meeting was that the Indian Government should hold firm to its position and resist pressure from the US, EU and other export oriented countries to prematurely open up its markets to agricultural imports. This was achieved. India and other developing countries held firm and a bad deal was avoided. No agreement on agriculture was signed, but there was, as mentioned above, a commitment that the future agreement will recognise the right of developing countries to protect certain products of vital importance to poor farmers, and that these will be self-designated by the developing country. Provided the Indian Government chooses crops that are important to the poor this could eventually be a major 'win'.

The extent to which the Indian Government's resolve in Hong Kong was a direct consequence of the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign in India, or something that simply would have happened anyway, is not clear. Attribution is always difficult in this type of advocacy campaign. However, there are some indications that its effect was significant. In late 2006, as part of an internal review of the campaign, staff members in India were asked their views on various aspects, and the results were compiled into one document. To a question on whether the campaign had any impact on government decision makers, the Indian staff said:

The Commerce Minister has acknowledged the role of Oxfam in awareness generation both in print and electronic media. Moreover, the official language of the Ministry in public forums has changed to include words like 'fair trade', 'livelihood security' and even the 'Big Noise' signature campaign.....The fact that farmers are knowledgeable about issues of importance (to them) and are becoming more assertive in their demands for

fair trade and change in policies in their favour has perhaps led the government to at least re-think its stand on these issues.¹⁵

More open attitude by government to NGOs

Oxfam's Regional Trade Advisor in India, Palash Kanti Das, who played a key role in the campaign, believes that the government felt sufficient pressure from the campaign to wish to talk to the NGOs involved, including Oxfam, and since then, has been keen to have a government representative invited to any NGO seminar on trade.¹⁶ In the longer term, he believes that Oxfam in particular has gained credibility and influence with the government and business groups. Evidence of Oxfam's reputation with Commerce Minister, Kamal Nath came in early 2007 when he invited Oxfam and another local NGO (CUTS) to be co-organisers with the government of a conference in Delhi on the future of the WTO negotiations. The conference was successful, but resulted in Oxfam being seen by some as too close to the Indian Government and too supportive of the WTO.¹⁷

It was not only Oxfam that gained this new recognition from government. The research organisation CENTAD also did. Although established by Oxfam, it is not part of Oxfam, having become independent some years ago. CENTAD has gained a strong reputation with both the government and business groups. Both are interested in what it has to say, and its researchers are now often asked by them to give talks and seminars.¹⁸ A seminar in early 2007 organised by CENTAD to launch its South Asia Yearbook was attended by both the current and former chief trade negotiators, and during it, the former chief negotiator remarked that he wished there had been organisations like CENTAD and Oxfam around at the time of the earlier rounds of WTO negotiations, as the outcomes then might have been different.¹⁹

Other NGOs have also benefited. There appears to have been a general opening up of the space for NGOs in India to dialogue with relevant parts of government on issues related to trade and development. This is the view of Dr Samar Verma, overall head of the Oxfam campaign in India, who believes that the solid research, analysis and political understanding that this campaign

displayed has helped to break down the old view that government held of NGOs as being shallow and driven by ideology. As the in-country staff review said: “The partners felt that local government bodies now sympathise with their cause, but do not openly support them due to the nature of their job”.

Changed discourse by NGOs on trade

One of the other achievements of the campaign was that it brought to the development NGOs in India a coherent analysis of how international trade and development were connected. For most NGOs the impact of international trade was a relatively new issue, for until recently the country had striven for self-sufficiency and trade had not been particularly significant. But with globalisation and liberalisation this has all changed. Regional Trade Advisor, Palash Kanti Das, expresses it thus: “Before the campaign most Indian NGOs were more-or-less aware of the WTO and its impact on farmers, but were vague on the details of how that impact was manifested locally. In a sense Oxfam helped bring that perspective, which was of considerable interest to them. Many were energised by the simple ‘Make Trade Fair’ message and the slogan really caught on.”²⁰

The notion that the Oxfam campaign helped change the views of local NGOs concerning trade was shared by other Oxfam staff members in India, who felt that it moderated an essentially abolitionist view towards the WTO with a reformist one: “Different sections of civil society are coming together now to talk on trade-related issues. The ‘reform WTO’ angle taken up by Oxfam is an important contribution to civil society stance on trade, which earlier were either pro or anti-WTO.”²¹

Challenges, limitations and failures

No direct benefits to farmers

The campaign was all about influencing the agreement on agriculture at the WTO, and no serious thought was given to how this would translate into benefits for farmers. The result was that there were no perceivable benefits for farmers from this campaign. All that could be said is that in preventing a WTO agreement that would have prematurely opened India to subsidised agricultural imports, the campaign prevented the situation from becoming worse.

It has to be recognised in any advocacy campaign that many steps are needed in order for benefits to reach the poor. In this case, a 'win' at the WTO would need to be accompanied by a number of changes of policy and practice by the Indian federal government and various state governments and Agricultural Ministries, so that farmers were able to benefit from the trade regime. This highlights the fact that the campaign was not built on the need to solve a local problem, but on the need to support an international campaign. This was not so much a local campaign as a local part of a wider global campaign.

Local priorities not taken up

After going through a lengthy consultation process, to which many people devoted time and effort, in order to determine what local organisations felt should be the priorities for the campaign, their views were ultimately marginalised in favour of priorities emanating from Oxfam in Europe. This was harmful for relations between the local Oxfam program and its partner organisations and potential allies, who would be quite justified in thinking that their time had been wasted, and their input and advice discounted. However this was not entirely true. It would be more accurate to say that their experience and advice was taken on board and used, but only at a later stage. In 2005 pressure from Oxfam's international 'Make Trade Fair' campaign prevailed, and the WTO agenda was inserted and completely took over the campaign for a year or so leading up to the WTO Ministerial.

Did Oxfam distort partners' priorities?

In approaching the organisations that ran the road-shows and offering money for them to do this popular mobilisation, did Oxfam distort their organisational priorities? The view of Regional Trade Advisor, Palash Kanti Das, is that it probably did, but they were sufficiently interested and excited by the 'Make Trade Fair' message and perspectives to take it up. According to Das, Oxfam paid them because no matter how interested they were in the issues and the campaign, without the extra funds they would not be in a position to do anything. It was seen as a joint effort – Oxfam provided the funds and the ideas, and they provided the people and local expertise to put them into practice.²² Dr Samar Verma, who led the campaign for Oxfam agrees. He says Oxfam changed their priorities rather than distorted them and that the change was a positive one. The fact that they took up Oxfam's analysis indicates that it fitted with their experience. If it had been inconsistent with their grassroots experience or their political beliefs they would not have agreed to take part.²³

Did Big Noise signatories understand what they were signing?

There is no way of knowing to what extent the six million Indians who signed the Big Noise petition knew what they were signing. No doubt some did and some did not, to different degrees. According to the internal review of the campaign, staff felt that "though very few people signed without directly questioning the purpose of the signatures and its implications, there have been cases when women signed up because their husband or peer group is a signatory". The staff also felt that "from being just a signature drive in its initial phase, Big Noise is now all about informed signatures".

Das related that in January 2004, he started collecting Big Noise signatures at the India Social Forum in Mumbai, but found it difficult to explain the usefulness of the petition to the various groups represented there – labour unions, farmers associations, women's groups, etc. There was concern about

how the petition would be used given that, on the one petition, there were signatures collected from groups with a very diverse range of issues and concerns.

Factors that contributed to success

One of the reasons this campaign was successful was that it set itself an objective that was not hard to achieve - to support the position of the Indian Government in the WTO negotiations. This is the easiest kind of advocacy campaign, whose aim is to support the target's existing policies or practices rather than to oppose or change them. Indeed, the Indian Government may have held to its position at the WTO even if Oxfam had done nothing.

Another factor in its success was the popular support that it was able to generate in the form of the Big Noise petition with its six million signatures. Farmer Ramakrishan who handed over the signatures to Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, said he felt that the number of signatures represented the strength of the campaign and that this made the Minister notice the plight of farmers.²⁴

But perhaps the most important factor in the success of this campaign was its ability to provide the government with well-researched documentation, evidence and arguments that its trade negotiators could use to support their position at the WTO. These included a series of several dozen Briefing Papers that were produced by Oxfam in Europe and the US during this period, concerning various aspects of the WTO negotiations, and which analysed the impact on the poor of what was being proposed by the EU, US and others in the negotiations. The analysis in these papers drew on Oxfam's understanding of what assisted or hindered development, based on years of working in a variety of countries, and on its knowledge of the tactics being used in the negotiations gleaned from its network of offices and contacts in Geneva, Brussels, Washington and other capitals. This combination of political intelligence and ability to analyse negotiation proposals in terms of their impact on the poor was a powerful combination.

Because of this, and because the positions that Oxfam advocated in these documents were consistent with those of the Indian Government, the latter embraced these materials with enthusiasm, and this led to a good relationship between the two. It can be surmised that the government's attitude towards Oxfam was also influenced by the fact that it was an organisation with a popular support base in the countries whose governments were trying to pressure it, that it could supposedly influence public opinion in Europe and the United States.²⁵

These Oxfam International Briefing Papers were written for a global audience, and were not specific to India. However, similar materials that were specific to India, and which were written from a local perspective on local issues, were produced by CENTAD in Delhi, and these were also well received by the government and its trade negotiators.

Factors that limited success

A major factor limiting the success of the campaign in terms of outreach and generating a level of popular support was the sheer lack of time. The campaign did not really get underway until well into 2005, and it had to be completed before the Commerce Minister and his team departed for Hong Kong in December. Initially Oxfam in India did not have the staff or the organisational structures in place to run such a large campaign. Suitable people had to be recruited and trained at short notice, and new systems put into place to cope with this new set of activities. The result was a frantic effort over a few months that exhausted the staff.

Because of the lack of experience of Oxfam in India with popular campaigning and mobilising large numbers of people onto the streets, it made sense to sub-contract these activities to a partner organisation. But this meant that Oxfam was running that part of the campaign at one step removed, and delegating a certain amount of responsibility to partner organisations for what was said in the name of the campaign. As mentioned above, this led to some distortions. Parts of the campaign's message were too complex for the average NGO staff member or volunteer, and a combination of this and the fact that so many diverse organisations and individuals were involved, made it almost inevitable that distortions would appear.

The role of Oxfam

This was basically an Oxfam campaign - not so much an Indian campaign as a part of an international campaign that was being run in India. The agenda, the messaging and the strategy were all determined by Oxfam, who also provided the funding. Not all of it was branded as an Oxfam campaign (the popular campaigning being branded 'Make Trade Fair') but some was, and in particular the lobbying in Delhi was done in Oxfam's name. This was a little unusual for Oxfam, which, as a general principle, does not push itself forward in this way in the South, but instead supports local partner organisations and allies to advocate themselves on the issues that arise from their development work.

There are several reasons for this. First, international NGOs like Oxfam are effectively foreign organisations in the South, and therefore constrained in what they can do politically. They do not have the same political rights or mandate as a local NGO, and cannot take the same direct advocacy role that they do in their own society in the North. More importantly, because it is so big, well-resourced and well-connected, any advocacy or campaigning that an organisation like Oxfam does in a Southern country can tend to push aside less-confident local advocacy organisations. Its role should be to encourage and support effective advocacy and campaigning by local actors, not swamp them or displace them. Also, advocating in its own name in a Southern country can, in some cases, endanger Oxfam's development assistance program in that country, especially if it antagonises the government. It is not unknown for an international NGO to be thrown out of a country because it upset the government. In this case however this was not a danger as the campaign was supportive of the government.

There are however exceptions to this general principle of not doing advocacy in its own name in the South, for example when the use of the Oxfam name and its international reputation can 'open doors' or influence governments in ways that local NGOs cannot, and local partners request Oxfam to do so. In

Sri Lanka, for example, during a campaign on labour rights in the garment industry in 2004, partners and allies asked Oxfam to lead on public advocacy on the basis that the government and industry leaders would not listen to them, but would listen to Oxfam. The official position was set down in 2003 by the Executive Directors and Board of Oxfam International:

Oxfam will seek to support partners and allies in their advocacy and campaigns strategies because they have primary legitimacy in their own countries, and because we believe that this will have most impact in terms of promoting long-term, sustainable change. When we support, rather than lead in this way, we will subsume our own brand unless there is a justification for not doing so. Oxfam can also advocate and campaign in the South in its own name where the use of the Oxfam brand significantly increases the impact on poverty, or if it is not safe for partners and allies to do so.

This Indian campaign was an example in which “the use of the Oxfam brand significantly increases the impact on poverty”. As an international organisation it could increase impact by bringing to the campaign Oxfam briefing papers and other research as well as political intelligence from Geneva and elsewhere, a global media presence, and secure funding. Furthermore it was advocating, not about a local issue, but an international one on which it had an established reputation, which no other organisation in India had. Dr Samar Verma (the overall head of the campaign in India) believes that Oxfam had no choice but to run this campaign itself as there was no other organisation in the country that could do so effectively. As evidence of this, he describes the occasion in which the British Foreign Secretary was visiting India and Verma pulled together a group of prominent NGO representatives to meet with him in Delhi. However, none of them felt confident enough to make a presentation to the Foreign Secretary on the issues of trade and the WTO negotiations, and consequently asked Oxfam to do so on their behalf. A similar thing happened

in March 2005 at the time of the G20 meeting in Delhi, when two international NGOs ended up doing most of the lobbying of Trade Ministers.

Conclusion

While the outcome at Hong Kong did not provide any direct benefits to farmers in India, it did at least prevent things from getting worse. Sometimes this is all that can be said of a campaign. For a campaign to benefit the poor, many steps have to be achieved. This campaign focused on only one, WTO rules. There also has to be changes in the policies and practices of the Indian federal and state governments and other moves before benefits reach the farmers.

The campaign also contributed to a more open attitude by the Indian Government and think tanks towards NGOs. The solid research, analysis and political understanding that this campaign displayed helped to break down the old view that government held of NGOs as being shallow and ideologically driven, and demonstrated that their views are worth taking note of. In the process it also helped to change the discourse around trade and its links to rural development among government officials and Indian NGOs.

On the negative side, this campaign achieved nothing in the way of direct benefits for farmers. And the fact that Oxfam ran this campaign in its own name in India, and sub-contracted local NGOs to assist it, raises some questions about the appropriate role of an international NGO in Southern advocacy.

¹ This paper was originally presented to the Institute of Commonwealth Studies International Workshop: 'The impact of transnational non-governmental public actors (NGPAs) on policy processes and policy outcomes: translating advocacy into sustainable policy engagement' held at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, 11th – 12th September 2007. The Workshop was funded by the ESRC-NGPA Programme and the Commonwealth Foundation.

² Oxfam America, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam Quebec, Oxfam Ireland, Oxfam GB, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands), Oxfam Belgium, Oxfam Intermon (Spain), Oxfam Germany, Oxfam Japan, Oxfam Hong Kong, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam New Zealand.

³ Oxfam India will eventually build up a funding base in India, and will use the money raised from the public there to fund programs in other countries and continents, as well as a domestic program in India.

⁴ Oxfam International website www.oxfaminternational.org

⁵ That is, the removing of all 'barriers to trade' such as tariffs and quotas, which in the past have been used by governments to protect their local producers.

⁶ Its membership varies a little from time to time, but basically consists of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, Philippines, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

⁷ Because this campaign was run jointly by the Oxfam affiliates in South Asia, I have in this report tended to use the name "Oxfam" to refer to them all jointly. In fact most of the work of this campaign was done by the Delhi-based staff of Oxfam Great Britain, assisted by Oxfam India. But it was done in the name of, and with substantial financial support from, two other affiliates, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) and Oxfam Australia, under the auspices of the Oxfam Regional Strategic Team for South Asia.

⁸ Oxfam International. *Small-scale agriculture in the era of globalisation. Sub-national consultations on trade and agriculture. India report.* New Delhi, December 2004.

⁹ Atkinson, J. *'Make Trade Fair' Campaign on Trade and Agriculture in India and Bangladesh.* Oxfam Australia, Melbourne, July 2005.

¹⁰ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

¹¹ Oxfam International, Make Trade Fair website www.maketradefair.org

¹² Kumar Gautam, Oxfam GB, Research Coordinator, Trade and Agriculture campaign in South Asia. *The report on the progress and the problems.* New Delhi, Dec 2005.

¹³ Oxfam International, Make Trade Fair website www.maketradefair.org

¹⁴ Of all the countries in which signatures were gathered, India topped the list with over six million signatures.

¹⁵ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

¹⁶ Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.

¹⁷ This did not go down well in Bangladesh, where India is seen as a dominant neighbour and serious trade rival, and affected Oxfam's relations with government and NGOs in that country.

¹⁸ Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.

¹⁹ Dr Samar Verma, former Oxfam Regional Policy Advisor, South Asia, interview May 2007.

²⁰ Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.

²¹ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

²² Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.

²³ Dr Samar Verma, former Oxfam Regional Policy Advisor, South Asia, interview May 2007.

²⁴ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

²⁵ This was certainly the case in Australia where the government's attitude towards Oxfam and its campaign on the WTO Agreement on Agriculture was strongly influenced by the fact that Oxfam could supposedly influence public opinion in the EU and US, whose government Australia wished to convince to eliminate their agricultural subsidies.