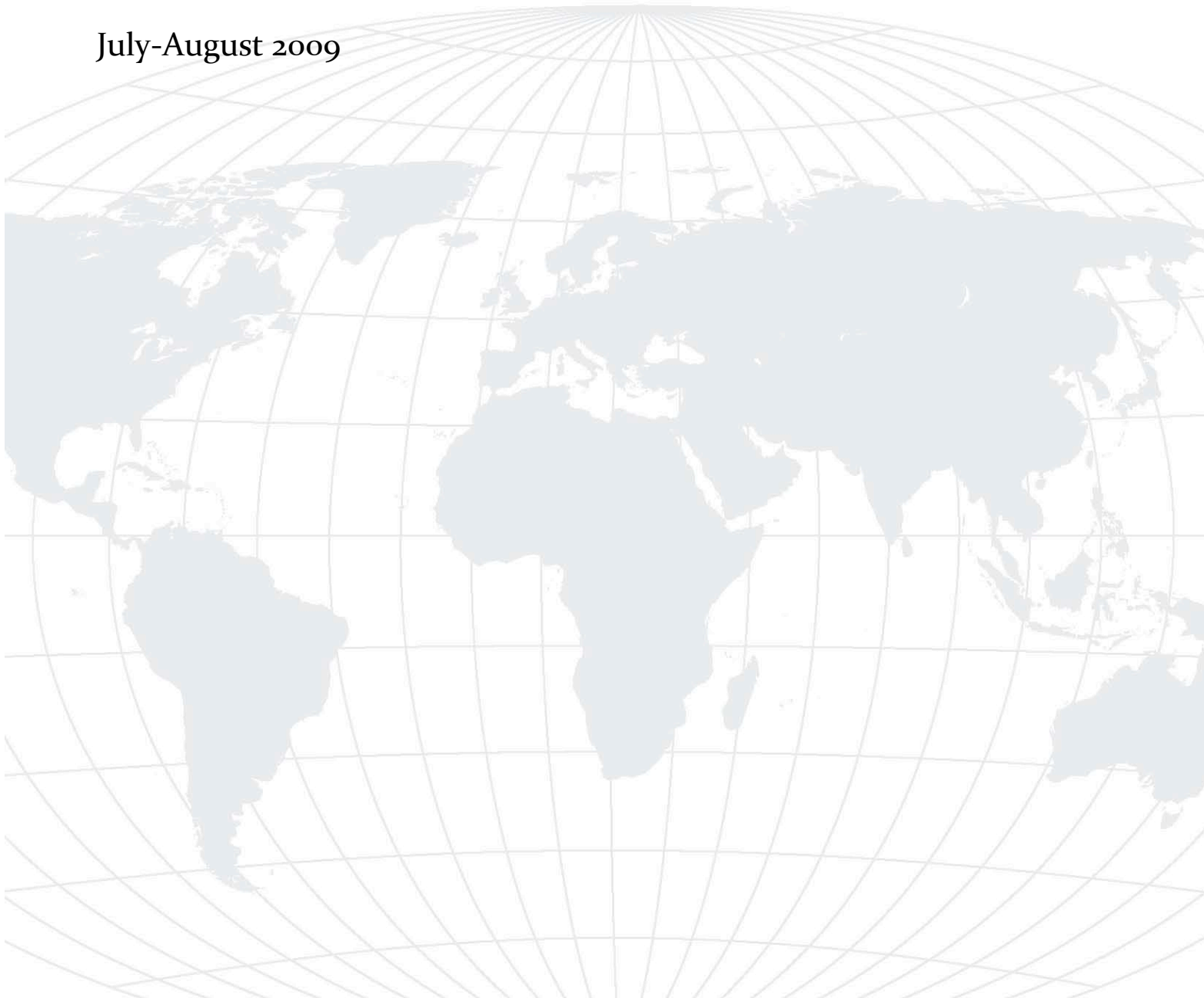


LISTENING PROJECT

Field Visit Report

Mindanao, Philippines

July-August 2009



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

These documents do not represent a final product of the project. While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

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Background on the Listening Project

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has established the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts. The Listening Project seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by various international actors. Those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, peacebuilding efforts, environmental conservation and human rights work can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such efforts.

The Listening Teams were made up of staff from international and local organizations, with facilitators from CDA. The teams did not use pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, we told people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, we were interested to hear from them how they perceived these efforts. We asked if they would be willing to spend some time with us, telling us their opinions and ideas. In this way, we conversed about their issues of concern, without pre-determining specific topics.

Many conversations were held with one or two individuals, but in some cases, larger groups formed and what began as small-group dialogues became, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. In most cases, conversations were not pre-arranged (except for appointments with government officials and other key stakeholders). A Listening Team would travel to a community and strike up a conversation with whomever was available and willing to talk, speaking both to people who had and had not received international assistance.

Over a period of four years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty locations, with Mindanao, Philippines being the 17th Listening Exercise so far. The Listening Project will gather what we hear from people in all of these locations in order to integrate these insights into future aid work and, thereby, to improve its effectiveness.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the people who took time to share their thoughts with us, and on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those staff and community members who were involved in Mindanao deserve great appreciation for their generous support, insights, and dedication.

The Listening Exercise in Mindanao, Philippines

The Listening Exercise in Mindanao was conducted in late July to early August 2009. Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) hosted this collaborative learning effort and generously provided a local facilitator to join four CDA facilitators. The Mindanao Listening Exercise included the largest number of participating organizations to date –fifteen in total. The following organizations provided generous logistical support, dedicated staff, financial resources and input into the listening process: Balay Mindanaw Foundation, Inc (BMFI), Catholic Relief Services

(CRS), Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (CBCS), Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits, Inc (ECOWEB), Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID), International Center for Peace in Mindanaw (ICPeace), Katilingbanong Pamahandi sa Mindanaw Foundation, Inc. (KPMFI), Kalimudan, Mindanao Commission on Women (MCW), Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC), Nagdilaab Foundation, Peace Builders Community (PBC), Reach International Health Care and Training, Southern Christian College (SCC) and World Vision Philippines. These organizations work in the fields of development, advocacy, community organizing, inter-faith dialogue, media, humanitarian and medical assistance, education, peacebuilding and research. Forty-three staff members from participating organizations took part in the Listening Exercise.

The Mindanao Listening Team split into five regional teams and held conversations in Davao City, North Cotabato/Maguindanao, Zamboanga/Basilan, Lanao/Misamis and Bukidnon. We acknowledge that we were not able to visit many other distinct areas in Mindanao due to limited time and resources. However, the conversations held in these five diverse areas provided a broad and representative view of the local context and revealed patterns in the way external interventions have been experienced by people in Mindanao over the years.

The Listening Teams held 234 conversations with a total of 436 people, including 11 of the many tri-peoples groups¹ on the island, of which there are 21 Indigenous Peoples (IP) groups; Bangsamoro, of which there are 13 groupings; and migrants from other islands. Listening Teams spoke with government officials at municipal, barangay (district level), and provincial levels, the military, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), international and local NGOs and community based organizations (CBOs), academics, religious leaders, business people, community members, and laborers.

Listening Project conversations focused on the cumulative effects of all types of assistance that came from outside the community. To denote this, the Listening Teams used the terms: external assistance, aid delivery, outside interventions, international aid efforts, and any combination of those words. Some of this assistance is channeled through the national government to local government units (LGUs). Many native Mindanaoans feel that resources originating from Manila—such as donor funds provided by the national government or revenues spent out of national coffers—are also considered outside resources.

A Note on the History of International Assistance in Mindanao

According to the most recent census in September 2007, the population of Mindanao was 21.5 million and the percentage of people living in poverty ranged from 30% to an estimated 55% in some areas. The Philippine Human Development Report states that Mindanao includes some of the poorest provinces in the Philippines, including Tawi-Tawi, Maguindanao and Sulu.² According to the Mindanao Economic Development Commission (MEDCo), “agriculture is the driving force behind Mindanao's economy and close to a third of its land area is devoted to agriculture. More than one-third of the island's labor force is employed in the agriculture, fishery

¹The Term “Tri-Peoples” refers to the original Mindanao inhabitants: the Indigenous Peoples (IPs), the Islamicized tribal groups now called Moros and the latest group to settle in Mindanao, the Christians.

²Philippine Human Development Report 2008/2009, page 113, also see:

http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/asiathepacific/philippines/Philippines_NHDR_2009_EN.pdf

and forestry sectors. Mindanao provides over 40 percent of the Philippines' food needs and contributes more than 30 percent to the national food trade.”³ Mindanao’s natural resources have attracted many international corporations into the mining, agribusiness, and fishing sectors.

International assistance to Mindanao in the past 30 years has been provided in a context of on-going conflicts and humanitarian crises. Among the multi-faceted and often overlapping conflicts, the Moro armed struggle for self-determination led by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has characterized Mindanao in the recent decades. Other conflicts include the communist revolutionary struggle which has been ongoing since the late 1960s in Luzon, Visayas, and the Northern and Southern parts of Mindanao. Based on the Philippine Human Development report, factors driving the conflicts include: widespread poverty, inequitable distribution of wealth and control over the resource base; poor governance; injustice and abuse by those in authority; human rights violations; corruption and inefficiency in government bureaucracy; structural inequities in the political system; and exploitation and marginalization of indigenous cultural communities, including lack of respect and recognition of ancestral domain.⁴ In addition, there are recurring tensions and violent confrontations between clans in Mindanao, also known as “rido,” many of which have led to deaths, property damage and displacement.⁵

Aid to Mindanao comes in various forms, ranging from general and sectoral budgetary support, to project-based technical assistance and humanitarian aid in response to conflict and natural disasters. Much of this outside assistance is channeled through the government and a significant portion of assistance also comes in the form of military aid, most notably from the United States for counter terrorism operations. In addition, the International Monitoring Team (IMT) monitors the implementation of the ceasefire agreement brokered between the MILF and the government forces in 2001.

Mindanao received \$1.95 billion USD in 2007 in overseas assistance: \$1.26 billion in infrastructure, \$398 million for economic assistance, \$223 for development administration and \$68 million for social assistance.⁶ This figure does not include the assistance bypassing the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) and the programs directly implemented by international and local NGOs.

Much of the humanitarian aid has supported the care of internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), in 2008-2009, between 750,000 and 950,000 people were displaced.⁷ The Philippine National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) stated in July 2009 that 254,119 persons are still in the evacuation centers or

³Mindanao in Figures as of September 2008, presented by the Mindanao Economic Development Council (MEDCo), http://www.medco.gov.ph/medcoweb/uploads/MinFig/MinFig_as_of_September_2008.pdf

⁴Philippine Human Development Report, 2005. <http://hdn.org.ph/2005-philippine-human-development-report-peace-human-security-and-human-development/#download>

⁵Jamail A. Kamlian. “Incidences of Clan Conflict and Conflict Management: Survey of Feuding Families and Clans in Selected Provinces of Mindanao.” Study commissioned by USAID and the Asia Foundation. Available at: <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MSUIITExecSummary4.pdf>

⁶This amounts to 30% of Official Development Assistance (ODA) given to the Philippines (\$562 million USD in 2006). (<http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=CDB&f=srID%3A13300>)

⁷IDMC <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

are “home-based” displaced persons.⁸ These home-based IDPs are nearly invisible to the outside world due to the dispersed nature of their shelter.

Armed insurgencies by non-state actors, political violence and resource-based conflicts have contributed to the uneven development in Mindanao. Much of the outside assistance by donors and international organizations either directly or indirectly supports peace efforts in Mindanao through partnerships with local NGOs and civil society organizations, including interventions that promote reconciliation and build political space within the contested areas. There are also numerous locally initiated and community based efforts that use minimal outside resources to promote peacebuilding and development.

What People Said

Several prominent themes emerged in the many conversations held with a variety of people across Mindanao. Among the themes were several concerning the process of aid distribution and program implementation, relationships between the various actors involved in the provision of assistance, external priorities and agendas, and sustainability and long-term impact. Several topics, such as security and peacebuilding emerged in just a few regions.

1. Benefits of Aid Interventions

Given the poverty that affects so many Mindanaoans, many people expressed appreciation for outsiders providing help through development projects. People also appreciated the sense of solidarity that accompanies relief efforts after disasters. One flash-flood survivor in Misamis Oriental said, “We are grateful for the international aid. It’s more painful when poor people are wrenched by calamities and no one is helping them.” A health worker agreed, saying, “With all the international aid that came [for emergency relief], we are really thankful because even though we are here, far from them, we appreciate that they think of us. If we were to personally see them, we would hug them out of happiness.”

Many people cited positive contributions that external assistance has made in Mindanao. For example, in the area of human rights, people pointed to an increased awareness of the rights of children at the local government level. Others brought up examples ranging from large infrastructure development to improvements at local levels, such as a playground built with funds set aside for Muslim IDP children in Lanao, which was shared with the whole community.

One community leader in Western Mindanao said, “It takes someone to dream for us.” She was describing the role an Italian priest played in her impoverished community. By accessing resources and ideas beyond what was immediately imaginable and available to the community, he inspired confidence and locally driven changes were made possible with limited outside resources.

New and helpful ideas have been integrated into community life through long-term aid interventions. For example, a midwife in a Muslim community in Lanao described the benefits of a reproductive health education program which provided training to her. In the past, some family

⁸ National Disaster Coordinating Council, <http://210.185.184.53/ndccWeb/>

planning practices were viewed with suspicion, but now, nine years after being established, the family planning clinic has become self-reliant and the midwife's supplies are often out of stock due to high demand. She has seen the level of trust increase and the reproductive health program accepted in the community.

IDPs highlighted the benefits of psycho-social services to help people cope with the trauma of fleeing their homes from violence. One of the IDPs in Kulasihan, Lanao del Norte shared that, "We have seen changes in the community's behavior [because of the relief aid], especially in the youth. The children had been traumatized, but the psycho-social services have helped them to return to a normal life."

People in Zamboanga described the helpful contribution of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) which oversees the implementation of the 2001 ceasefire between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). One MILF official in Basilan acknowledged that the "IMT serves as a referee between us and military."

Aid Enhancing Capacities

People in communities and in the government identified several areas where outside assistance has supported local capacities. People described educational institutions that have been enhanced through new infrastructure, curriculum development and teacher training; farming methods that have been improved through resources and new techniques; and aid interventions that taught new skills and created jobs. The Listening Teams also heard appreciation for the capacity building efforts aimed at local government units, community leaders and local NGOs.

"I have gained skills in leadership, bookkeeping, and community organizing. And even though I haven't finished school, these trainings give me the capacities as if I had finished school. I see other people who have finished their education that have no work and less capacity. But I have more skills which I've used to apply for a position with the provincial government, where I am now working in community organizing."

CBO community advocate in Misamis Oriental

"The international aid is good, we are now benefiting off the project they had given to us. Pupils in the elementary schools are now equipped on how to use computers and almanac. We could see the difference between the students in our school and the other schools."

School teacher in Marantao

"Marawi is composed of 96 barangays and there aren't enough midwives or health stations for all of the areas. So foreign funds have helped to supply health equipment to those barangays and they are staffed by trained midwives. This has directly increased the rural access to health services, and the midwives have better skills."

City official in Lanao del Sur

"Aid has caused an improvement in technology. It brings modern farming techniques, increases output and increases economic ability. But we need to close the gap between international technology and the uptake of it."

Liaison Officer of Marawi City, Lanao del Sur

“Foreign aid provides an avenue for education thanks to the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) scholarship.”

A woman awarded a scholarship in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“[A program funded by a multi-lateral donor] is the most successful project in the province. It is need-based. There is labor counterpart from the community. It has a capacity development component. External assistance is important. Funds from LGUs and the national government cannot attend to all needs of the people. If external assistance is pulled out, it would be problematic both for the LGUs and the community.”

Local government employee in North Cotabato

“External assistance is very helpful. Radio program which foreign agencies fund serves as space for dialogues, conversations on various peace and development issues among different groups of peoples.”

Government official in Cotabato

“It’s a learning process for us to work with financial demands of donors.”

Peacebuilding office staff in Western Mindanao

Infrastructure Projects

When speaking about long-term impacts, people described roads, bridges, water and irrigation systems and solar driers. Several people in Misamis suggested that large infrastructure projects have a unifying effect on the community by addressing multiple problems, as in the case of a donor-funded road that had several benefits.

“Since we are in an agriculture/banana area, the road and bridge help trucks have access and get the ripe bananas, whereas before when it rained they spent more money paying people to haul the bananas across the river. So the road helps us spend less money on hauling and transport of our products.”

CBO Community Advocate in Lagonglong, Misamis Oriental

A CBO Community Advocate in Lanao commented on the benefits of another road funded by a multilateral donor, saying it “helped me access school when I was in high school, even when it was raining. The project is very significant because now there are less out of school youth because school is highly accessible. In the past, by mid-school year kids would just stop coming all together because they would get tired of going because there would be no transport.”

In the case of solar driers and water projects, people suggested that these projects can enhance inter-community cooperation if that element is intentionally integrated into the project design. In addition, it was pointed out to the Listening Teams that successful, large infrastructure projects enhance the credibility of the government even when the resources are provided entirely from outside.

People also talked about how improved infrastructure and accessibility also aided corporate interests such as mining, as well as illicit and destructive activities like illegal logging:

“Improved roads provide more access for illegal logging and that impacts the watershed and the renewable energy and hydro projects. This issue should be approached as a big collaborative effort – education, economic development, livelihoods, and involving the community in renewable energy development. These [types of programming] are the antidote to insurgency.”

Provincial cooperative officer in Lanao del Norte

2. Relationships between Aid Recipients and Providers

People described several ways in which aid providers, aid recipients and other key stakeholders such as the local government, should work together more in order to foster effective development. Among the themes highlighted in this section are comments on the process of consultation, community involvement in decision making, and cultural sensitivity.

The Consultation Process

Virtually every person mentioned the importance of the consultation process and many people expressed frustration with NGOs who do not carry out proper consultations before introducing projects. A staff member of a donor-funded peace and development initiative in Davao saw the lack of consultation by some donors and implementers as disrespectful. He and others considered regular stakeholder consultation a critical step in determining if a project needs to be re-designed or stopped all together, noting how a number of projects in the past have not received input from the actual participants.

The teams in North Cotabato and Maguindanao areas heard about several international agencies that determine needs based on assumptions and without community consultation. One academic in that region cited examples of a pig livestock project built in a predominantly Muslim community and the construction of hospital facilities with no medical practitioners. He believed that consultation would have, in the first case, uncovered a serious cultural and religious issue with pigs in a Muslim community, and identified the lack of local personnel for a hospital in the second.

A community advocate in Misamis, Oriental echoed many people’s comments by calling on all INGOs to spend more time in consultations at the community level: “Involve the local community. Before the project, prepare the local CBOs so they are prepared to manage the project. And the community should be involved because they are the beneficiaries of the project and they are the ones who know better than anyone else what they need, what they want, and what they can do in order to make it a successful project.”

A Muslim leader in Western Mindanao said that a consultative process helps aid agencies to work through the “right channels.” Whether by deliberate design or oversight, not consulting local officials can cause tensions that may impede progress in the project. In one case, a local Department of Social Welfare officer in Lanao del Norte commented that the NGOs are supposed to get clearance from them to work in the community but instead the NGOs go directly to the community, which makes them feel disrespected. He added, “Some of the NGOs don’t give us importance because they aren’t closely coordinating, because they look down on us and they go directly to the community.”

Meaningful consultation is regarded as critical for both development and peacebuilding focused projects:

“Part of the consultation process at the local level is to educate about the process of peacebuilding and development. These are long-term complex processes that involve multiple steps and actors. How peace would be achieved is something that many people don’t understand even while being engaged in a peacebuilding project. It is critical to explain and engage people in a dialogue about how after a peace agreement is signed, there will be constitutional changes, then legislative, etc. and all that takes time.”

Director of a local peacebuilding NGO in Davao City

“There are several types of implementing approaches used by organizations working here in Mindanao. Some are very conscious of the conflict and aware of conflict sensitive programming principles, such as *Do No Harm*. The others provide technical assistance and projects implemented by contractors who build physical infrastructure such as schools, clinics. The latter ones often do not practice a consultative approach and de-emphasize ownership. Sometimes this leads to tensions.”

Program staff at a peace and development organization in Davao

Community Engagement in Decision Making

Many people urged development actors to engage communities in project design and planning processes. A person in Lanao said he “would like to be part of the planning from the beginning... victims [of disasters] should be given a chance to be involved in the process.” A barangay captain in one Lanao district said “we wished we would be part of the whole process from the identification down to the monitoring level of the project for us to be aware and be responsible.”

In Bukidnon, people described how one international agency spent three years consulting with the local government and community members before implementation began. By the end of this period, they had engaged the community in formulating the project plan. In the process, community organizing took place and representatives joined the municipal development council, which made them feel more involved at the municipal level. A local government official said that this process was also culturally sensitive and enhanced the recognition of indigenous people.

However, lengthy assessment processes were criticized in other locations, such as this instance described by a provincial engineer in Misamis Oriental, “The long process of assessment of some international aid is redundant. The engagement started last year and they have sent 6-7 teams to assess the area asking the same questions. The community feels weary waiting for the project.”

Listening Teams heard many examples about communication gaps in the entire process from needs assessment to decision making about what, how and when projects are implemented. People suggested that regular communication with donors could improve their understanding of the needs and realities on the ground. An ex-barangay captain in Bukidnon recommended that in the case of collective agriculture projects, outside agencies need to work with the community to conduct a feasibility study and other research to ensure the benefits of improved production.

People also suggested that agencies should work with the community to identify the right person to lead the project due to concerns about corruption.

Cultural Sensitivity

Several positive examples of projects designed with cultural sensitivity came from an indigenous community in Bukidnon where an outside agency supported the strengthening of the local justice system, including the traditional forms of justice and conflict resolution. Some of the traditional justice rituals took place behind the municipal office, which the indigenous people appreciated as respectful to their culture while linking them to existing government mechanisms. In another indigenous community, residents described how an international donor consulted with the community to determine ways to help promote their culture. After a dialogue with community members, including the local leader, the agency agreed to fund the construction of a Peace Hall. Traditional leaders mobilized the youth and initiated the construction and the hall is now identified as a local symbol of unity. It has opened up opportunities for people in the community to share their art with visitors, host meetings and activities—such as peace camps—and invite others to use the space.

People also discussed examples of how aid had been distributed in an insensitive way. A city official in Lanao del Sur noted that, in the Maranao culture, people are hesitant to receive aid for fear of being seen as beggars, and suggested, “Aid can reach locals if it is done through local agencies, because they know how to do it in accordance with the local customs. For example, one time they made people queue for food aid, and you didn’t see anyone in the line, because it made them feel like beggars.”

A Muslim leader in Zamboanga discussed the misunderstandings that arise when outsiders come to work in Bangsamoro areas and he urged them to take the time to understand the world view of the Bangsamoro by building trust through a long term presence. He referred to outsiders as “Too white to become a Moro... [you] have to find local resources in the community which are hidden and look for the right opportunity to be revealed.”

Another example came from Davao City from staff in a program formerly funded by outside donors and recently integrated into the government structures. The program aims to develop competencies for indigenous students through curriculum enhancement, development, and teacher training. Staff reported that after introducing the curriculum, students’ academic standing improved and parents are now involved in their children’s education and school activities by teaching dance and music. There is also increased awareness of indigenous culture among the school staff. In the process, there were numerous consultations carried out with community representatives about what kind of education their children should have. Most indigenous people want their children to learn to read and write but not to lose their tribal identity. The project measured its success, to some degree, by the cultural impact, as noted by one of the program staff who said, “We designed a curriculum that allows the children to find themselves in it and to continue practicing their traditional customs while also learning the skills needed in the modern world. Sample content was discussed with leaders of these communities to ensure that there are no serious disagreements. We find people are happy. They are no longer ashamed of their

cultural ways and are able to display them in a public way that allows for sharing and recognition. Children are wearing traditional clothing to school again.”

Reflections of the Listening Team on Relationships between Aid Recipients and Providers

Listening Team members discussed why so many people were disappointed in the consultation process since most organizations are committed to consulting community members and it is a requirement to be implemented in each barangay. The issue appeared to be in how these consultations are conducted and how the collected information is used. Team members wondered if outside agencies consider talking to local agencies as “consultation,” while local people asked for periodic consultation between donors and the grassroots/community members.

One team member echoed the comments heard in the communities by suggesting that donor representatives must spend time in the recipient communities at each interval of the planning, implementing and monitoring stages. This time spent would allow the donors to get a fuller picture of the context and potential impact of their projects. It would also enhance the relationships with the community by allowing time and space for dialogue not only about the project, but also about other aspects of life that may be impacted. However, some of these suggestions run counter to the commitment by donors to use national systems and to support the national government as the main driver of development. While donors aim to lower their visibility in recipient societies, the recurring request for donor presence and/or visits by local communities raises questions about people’s expectations and concerns.

It is concerning if donors, NGOs and government implementing agencies use the process of consultation as a way to justify predetermined decisions and then claim to be “participatory.” People say that they want to interact directly with implementing staff during the planning and implementation stages, however some organizations are able and willing to dedicate staff for regular field visits, while others cannot or do not. Team members thought that donors and implementers need to take the necessary time to engage the recipients in dialogue about their needs and priorities, even if this process takes years.

One Listening Team member reflected that often development interventions reduce people to mere beneficiaries of a project, rather than agents able to chart their own development. As a result, people outside the community dictate the types of projects that are implemented. This often leads to projects that do not meet local needs and are not culturally appropriate.

Another area of concern is the raised expectations that often result from interactions with needs assessment teams. Similarly, people shared disappointment about development projects that they perceive as unsuccessful given the scope of their accomplishments. Listening Team members cited an example about aid provided to one indigenous community in the city, which many people lamented as “still the poorest in the area.” This raised questions about expectations placed on projects and their impacts, which are quite small when compared to the scope of poverty.

Issues around cultural sensitivity and respect are of utmost importance for all development actors to consider, whether international or local. One person suggested foreign workers and consultants be paired with local counterparts who know the local context and culture. On the other hand, some team members suggested that decreasing reliance on outside consultants is

even better because the orientations about local culture and realities often caused delays in projects. One way that aid providers can demonstrate respect for the local context and cultures is to design some internal mechanisms to listen to ground-based wisdom in order to design and implement better programs.

3. Relationships between the Government and Assistance Providers

Many people, both in the government and at the community level, emphasized the need to include local government officials in decisions making and the implementation of international assistance projects. However, the relationship between NGOs and the government is complicated by expectations, tensions, and divergent views about how aid should be channeled.

“There are multiple stakeholders in the peacebuilding and development process. Many local actors are initiators and leaders on the ground. But a genuine grassroots organizing process can only be achieved and sustained when the government and international partners are collaborating and agree on the aims.”

Program staff in a multi-donor peace and development initiative

“Foreign aid creates distrust between community and LGU if goods are channeled through an NGO and not directly given to LGU.”

Local government official in North Cotabato /Maguindanao

“Aid given to [an organization] was channeled through LGU making delays in implementation and creating distrust in communities.”

Student in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“More problems will arise if foreign aid is pulled out. LGUs cannot attend to all the needs. National and local budget of LGUs is not enough.”

Local government official in North Cotabato

“Government can’t stand alone; we can’t give all the needs of the people and sustain them without the assistance of the NGOs so that is why the government really appreciates all of the assistance given by the NGOs. We need the NGOs to go with us and join us.”

Provincial social welfare officer in Lanao del Norte

“Working through local NGOs is good because there is immediate trust and acceptance, they have good contacts on the ground, and it also makes it easy and more effective to accomplish the projects.”

City official in Marawi City

One local city official in Davao thought it was logical for donors to work with the local government directly rather than through the national government in determining the development needs and priorities in Mindanao because “local government units are less political, and closer to the people.” One provincial government officer explained, however, that it is often unclear to local people where assistance comes from or why it is used in one area and not another. This creates confusion and raises questions about who makes the decisions about aid:

“Community members are not familiar with the distinction of international aid and government efforts. And they aren’t familiar with the difference between national money vs. provincial/local money. So, sometimes they wonder why the national road nearby gets fixed, but the local road doesn’t get fixed. They wonder ‘why isn’t the President helping us, why isn’t the governor helping us?’ The Barangay leaders try to explain to the local people why things happen the way they do, and why national funds can’t (legally) be spent for local projects and vice versa, and that the province often doesn’t have enough funds.”

Provincial government officer in Lanao del Norte

Listening Teams visited some rural areas where national and local governments were not visible and not able to support projects because it was not a priority or because of a lack of funds. In some of these areas, the NGOs have stepped in and are providing services that communities had expected from the government.

“We have not felt the presence of the government here for a long time. With the presence of the NGO we realize that there is a government.”

A farmer in Lanao del Norte

“The local NGOs are better because they stay in the communities, but the community members don’t have to spend a dime on them. But when the officials from LGU come they only spend a short time and they ask for live native chicken.”

Chieftain’s wife in a remote, indigenous village in Misamis Oriental

The Listening Teams heard some recommendations on how outsiders could help build local government capacity to meet the citizens’ needs. One idea was for outside agencies to provide institutional support and technical expertise to the local government, as well as direct budget support for salaries to be funded by donors. These are not new ideas and such programs have been implemented in the past. The long-term approach that is needed was highlighted by one staff person in a donor-government partnership program:

“One training does not help to shift the local government ways or the consciousness of the participants. The advocates that we work with at the local level work to change the paradigms over a long period of time. We recognize some impacts already. There has been a shift in approach at the local government level: from confined and rigid planning to a participatory and more inclusive process.”

Coordination and Shared Decision Making between Donors, NGOs and Government

Many people talked about how the local government has the mandate and long-term presence to follow through on community-based interventions, and they also emphasized how important it is to understand the local context and to include the local government in assistance efforts.

“Exit and phase out strategies need to be discussed with local government and other relevant organizations from the start. It should be part of the capacity building process for local government units to plan for sustainability.”

A Program Director in a peace and development initiative funded by foreign donors

Sometimes donors and NGOs charge ahead and implement programs without working with the local government, and this can have several consequences. Local officials can come under fire when they are asked to troubleshoot problems in projects they are not informed about. One official in Lanao/Misamis asked the Listening Team, “How can we resolve the problem when we didn’t even know about the project?” People suggested that donors and NGOs should study the comprehensive development plans written by local governments and determine areas for funding through dialogue and consensus.

“The distribution of aid must be coordinated with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and not with the politicians. The DSWD have the connection and communication channels. They have better method of assessing. There should be proper coordination with them so as to prevent duplication of services.”

Provincial Engineer in Misamis Oriental

“Those donors who’ve been on the ground longer understand the local dynamics and political context better. But people get moved around like ambassadors and that knowledge often goes with them. For example, people rarely ask, ‘Where is the source of authority and credibility within this community?’ before they enter one. In some places, it does not reside with the local government, but rather perhaps in the local rebel group or a community leader. Knowing local context is important in order to bring even more change through a development process. But this takes time.”

Local city official in Davao City

One government officer in Misamis suggested that the local government should always have one of their officials act as a counterpart to the international aid organization, to ensure accountability, take responsibility and address the issues of transient NGOs. He said, “I recommend that the LGU provides some counter parting, because sometimes the funds come in and they don’t care and aren’t held accountable for it.”

Reflections of the Listening Team on Relationships between Government and Aid Providers

Some team members were surprised to find that outside agencies and their local partners provide basic services in some areas because of the limited government presence. Team members discussed how working together, NGOs and local government could provide a more seamless coverage to communities. Team members were concerned that there is a tendency of donors wanting to partner with already capable government units and avoiding the ones perceived as “weak.” This means that those areas of Mindanao that have capable government units receive outside funding while others where local government is perceived as weak, do not, even though the areas that have weak governance need more support and capacity building. This preference to work with strong government units stems in part from donors’ need to meet reporting requirements, and those local government units with the capacity to articulate their needs are often the same ones that can provide the reports required by donors. Similarly, those local NGOs and CBOs with large enough capacity to implement projects are often the only ones able to meet stringent donor reporting requirements.

4. Relationships: Partnership vs. Paternalism

The distinction between partnership and paternalism has as much to do with the recipient's ability to know what they need as with the donors way of providing assistance. People spoke about important cultural and power dynamics between givers and receivers, outsiders (foreigners and people from Manila working in Mindanao) and locals, and the interdependence between all actors.

“Filipinos should be in the driver's seat on the development and peacebuilding road in Mindanao. Too many outside peace experts are here to do peacebuilding work. We have the skills locally and need to consolidate and work together better... What I like about our donor is that they like to learn from us. They say they learn a lot from our seminars and our process. In order to do that, they spend time with us and participate in these discussions. A donor is a true partner if they are listening to us. If they listen and learn they will accompany you and won't dictate. We share an understanding: we are in this together. A lot more is possible then.”

Director of local women's NGO in Davao

“Appropriate timing, transparent motives, and a joint strategy are all markers of a good partnership.”

Local NGO director in Davao

“[Assistance] should not be seen as just colonizer coming in or a “rich relative” coming in to give us a better life. But it is often seen this way... Long-term development takes time. Relationships are crucial. We tend to be personality driven here in the Philippines. If we like the person and we recognize the goodwill we are more willing to cooperate. Trust is a huge part of the success factor. The thing of pride is also there. We are the ones receiving assistance. A true partnership would mean having beneficiaries also give back in some form, to feel that they are not just receiving. This gives them dignity in the process.”

City official in Davao

“With huge amounts of aid coming through bilateral sources, the trickle down is challenged by many obstacles, but in the age of communication there should be more transparency and information. Community-based groups can now access some of the aid directly, apply for it on their own and make decisions on how it should be used and spent. This challenges the power dynamic between the various intermediaries and implementers that dot the landscape. This is problematic as well since not all communities have people in the know who can do this and articulate needs and capacities well. One obstacle in the Muslim community to getting an equal share of funds is the lack of experience dealing with donors and their expectations.”

Local NGO Director in Davao

“If we talk of partnerships, there is a vital role for financing, but the community also needs to be involved.”

University staff and community organizer in Western Mindanao

“Begging vs. Choosing”

There is tension within some individuals in accepting aid because of what they feel it says about them—mainly that they are beggars and incapable of taking care of their families. Listening Teams heard gratitude for assistance that was provided, yet we also heard how it affects or hurts people’s sense of pride.

“If your family member is in need, it is part of your pride to take care of them, rather than have them ask for outside help. It’s degrading to have to ask for outside help. In 2000, they were giving food aid and the families threw the food away, saying, ‘Why are you giving this to us? It is not to our liking. Because of the war, we have been turned into beggars... We prefer to die of hunger than to beg.’”

Local Government staff in Lanao del Sur

“People here don’t feel conflicted when they see others getting more aid because they see others in more need. It is part of our [Maranao] culture. We like to work for what we have, we don’t want to beg for assistance.”

Liaison Officer of Marawi City

“The pervasive attitude is that beggars can’t be choosers. In many cases, we don’t have much say in what gets funded. These programs usually benefit the donors in meeting their funding priorities. What we suggest often doesn’t fit their menu of options. After much back and forth, we end up asking them, ‘What do you want to fund?’ And then we adjust. But we have also turned down funding because it hasn’t met our priorities.”

City official in Davao

Conversely, we heard people describe how they were able to establish a relationship with aid providers that allowed them to choose what assistance was provided in their community. For instance, a local NGO in Bukidnon helped to empower members of the community to identify their own framework and vision for receiving aid. The community is now savvy about the aid that is offered and they ask for projects to fall within their framework.

In one indigenous community in Bukidnon, as a result of experiences with past development projects, people have learned to be more careful about engaging in projects. They decide on them as a group now, carefully weighing the costs and benefits. Their steps are to: (a) have an MOU between parties, (b) do internet research to gather more information about the funder; (c) discuss among members of the community if they should accept the funding; and (d) ask the funding agency to have an honest discussion with the community about both the pros and the cons of the funding. One local peacebuilding and development group in this community proposed modern forms of coffee production, but the indigenous people wanted to use traditional practices, so now they are engaged in a dialogue to find methods that are culturally sensitive and efficient.

In Lanao del Norte, former MILF combatants are receiving assistance to rebuild their community. One aid organization tried to give them a new house, and they felt the house was too small and wouldn’t be useful for them. So they turned down the offer and instead suggested that the organization give them the money and they would in turn contribute their own part, and build a bigger house. The organization agreed and in partnership, they built a larger house. A

provincial government official noted, “They know what they want from assistance and they know what they are missing from the government. So they know what to ask for and they aren’t afraid to ask for it.”

The Way Aid is Provided Affects Relationships

Some people talked about how the way aid is provided affects local relationships, causing tension, jealousy and feelings of injustice about who got what and how. For instance, in Lanao, conflict between recipients emerged over differing standards from three housing projects at an IDP site. There are three different types of houses given to those who lost their houses in the conflict, and IDPs complain that their old houses were better than the ones that have been provided. Some of the blame for this was laid at the feet of the government for not creating uniform standards for the three implementing agencies responsible for the construction. In Davao, Listening Teams heard about a project implemented in one target area which created tensions with the neighboring barangays because no communication or explanations were provided about why certain areas were targeted.

“Foreign agencies are very welcome, but external assistance causes internal conflicts. External assistance should be given to the right persons and groups.”

A university Dean in North Cotabato

“Some external agencies cause conflict and jealousy in the community, especially funding agencies with unclear policies. Some funding agencies impose and give us the impression that they know better than us. Some international agencies discourage or do not follow up or entertain additional requests.”

An elder in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

People are also frustrated when photos taken in their communities are used to raise funds without proper recognition of the work done by local community organizers. One local NGO director in Western Mindanao said, “Intermediaries entertain the big donors, not little NGO heroes.”

Many people also spoke about the tensions arising from the way money is spent by outside agencies.

“Foreign assistance causes imbalances in the community. Staff of agencies (both local and international) receive more pay.”

Academic, North Cotabato

“That’s why the projects fail, because I observe most of the funds are being used for the administrative costs, like high salaries and lavish spending of the NGO staff.”

Farmer and engineer in Lanao/Misamis

“One [donor-funded] project had 50-50 shared responsibility with the city government. But they spent much of their money on hiring outside experts. We were not satisfied and decided not to extend to Phase II and had to write the report about Phase I ourselves because their consultants were not capable and left without finishing their part.”

Local city official in Davao

“People in communities say ‘oh these people [the project implementers] are using our issues to earn a lot of money.’”

An NGO worker in Western Mindanao

“Foreign agencies operate their own programs in our area. They employ their own people; pay their staff with high salaries. All this is harmful to the local communities. Foreign agencies’ [presence] is bad for the employment of and capacitating local people, and it’s bad for the image of the local NGOs and CSOs.”

Chairman of local organization in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

Reflections of the Listening Team on Partnership vs. Paternalism

It is clear that many people on the receiving end of assistance want stronger relationships with donors as well as between donors and implementing partners. Team members discussed ways to build multiple layers of trust in all of these relationships, noting that creating networks is not the best answer because networks do not always foster better coordination. By making good relationships a priority, however, donors can mitigate potential conflicts and even help inter-communal conflicts from erupting through better information sharing. Team members noted that in the absence of access to information, people often fill in the gaps with their own assumptions.

5. External Priorities and Agendas

A director of a local NGO in Davao City observed that donors often change priorities and take on the “flavor of the month.” This pithy term aptly describes what Listening Teams in all regions heard about the priorities of donors and how frequently and quickly they shift. This section summarizes what we heard about donor priorities and agendas vs. community priorities, the focus on conflict, and hidden agendas.

Donor vs. Community Priorities

Several people raised concerns that when new donor priority areas and programs are introduced, there is often a disconnect with local level government representatives and grassroots leaders who are not informed about the objectives of the new programs or what the community role is expected to be. Many stressed the importance of listening to people in order to understand how new programs would affect local communities in both the immediate and long-term.

“[Donors] say ‘consultation’ in project documents, but conversations are often steered towards what is already on paper and what has been decided. Money already earmarked, decisions made elsewhere. Consultations often take the form of introductions of new projects. [Donors say] ‘If you want to avail of this money, you have to do this.’ We wish they asked: ‘What else can we support?’ The impact of this kind of relationship is clear in some places where local government units already know how to tailor their requests to each donor. We pattern our proposals based on their framework, not ours, or we reject funding if we are tired of this...Based on the amount of money that has been poured into Mindanao the impacts have not been proportionate. Maybe this is because the local governments, such as us here as well as local organizations, often tailor requests to what they think donors want to fund. This propagates bad programs. For example, climate change projects, there is a lot of money in it, but the local governments and communities

have not reached an understanding of what climate change aid is meant to do. But the thinking is since the money is available, let's apply for it.”

City Official in Davao City

“Maybe [the international organizations] know about what is needed...but they are restricted, stopped by their own institutional constraints. It is incumbent upon the people to do advocacy within their organizations in order to bring change. We were told by the donor to move work into an area that we were not working in—their priority area! We did not do it and lost money, terminated our relationship with them after negotiating with them to no avail. We did not want to become ‘technical implementers’ for someone else’s program.”

Local NGO Director in Davao City

To illustrate the disconnect between donor and local priorities, a leader of a successful organic rice farming organization in Bukidnon described how a bilateral donor wanted to give her organization more money for a rice mill project. She struggled to get the donor to shift the funds to be used for mortgaged rice fields instead so that the farming organization could produce more rice. “The [donor] officer offered us a loan for a rice mill, but we did not accept the loan because we don’t need it for such small rice production.” She explained that once they are able to produce more rice, the organization will decide for itself to buy a rice mill.

In Lanao del Norte, a farmer expressed frustration about one agency that wants to build a road, but the people keep asking for a water system because lack of potable water has affected the sanitation and health of the community. He pointed out that a well would save time not having to fetch water, and so, “we can do more farming.” In another rural community, people described how they shared their community goals with agency staff, but the implementing agency went ahead with its original plans. One person said, “We prioritized road and water projects, but what came was a storage facility. The facility was good because it saved our harvest, but it still wasn’t our necessity...If only we had a chance to participate in the planning.”

Donor priorities can also leave a perception of unfairly distributed development aid. One person in Lanao said: “It’s not really that we want more, but we’d like that there is a fair share for everybody...[it] seems that some projects are already pre-identified and prioritized.”

Focus on Addressing Conflict

It was eye opening for Listening Team members to hear that while there is a desperate plight among the tens of thousands of displaced persons, others with similar needs are overlooked because decisions about aid are closely tied to the donor focus on conflict-affected areas. For instance, some Muslim women said that because they live in harmony with their Christian neighbors in Davao, they do not receive any assistance. They saw this as an unfortunate result of conflict affected areas receiving the lion’s share of donor attention, especially in North Cotabato/Maguindanao and Lanao regions. People noted that within these regions, communities experiencing relative peace, but struggling with poverty or aftershocks of conflict are in fierce competition for aid resources with recent IDPs.

“It appears there is a need to be in war situation before we can get assistance.”

A community member in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“We have to risk our lives in order to get development aid.”
Barangay captain in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“Target priority for aid goes only to post war, post conflict areas.”
Student in North Cotabato / Maguindanao

“Aid causes cheating. Some families intentionally burn their house in order to get assistance.”
Student in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“Most of the foreign agencies attend only to victims of [conflict] disasters. Seldom or none of them attend to prevent the occurrence of disasters. I am more critical than optimistic about them. They come with their white staff, white Filipinos. We want long lasting solutions to violence.”
Chairman of an organization in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“Foreign aid should focus on resolving human rights violations or on projects where communities can run to when conflict arises.”
A student in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

Hidden Agendas

When too little information is provided, people tend to fill in the blanks and use their best judgment to make sense of what international donors and implementers are trying to do. For example, several people in Western Mindanao questioned what the US military is doing in Mindanao and wondered if the military was looking for resources under the guise of fighting terror. One by-product of American colonial history and the long running war for self-determination by the Bangsamoro is suspicion of American aid.

“International agencies might have some personal interest on Mindanao resources; they are initiating the war and continuously pour in their funding to justify their presence. Maybe their project is part of their positioning.”
Evangelical pastor in Davao City

“I had some funding from [a US donor] for English literacy programs, and the beneficiaries were Madrassa schools. Because they consider Americans to be anti-Muslim, they (the Ulama) didn’t want to accept the funding.”
Muslim teacher and CBO worker in Lanao del Sur

One person expressed a perception that when funding agencies collude with corporate interests and businesses, there can be a conflict of interest:

“We must discourage pursuit of business interest among funding agencies because this causes conflict of interests between their interest and the interest of the community.”
A local government official in North Cotabato / Maguindanao

The topic of a better communication process with the business sector was heard in two locations in Bukidnon where corporations had a presence. Community members, including the barangay

captain in one of the locations, felt that there was a need to build relationships between the company and the community to prevent disagreements.

6. Peacebuilding and Insecurity

Given the violence that faces many communities and the international focus on conflict in Mindanao, peacebuilding is a prominent area for international assistance. In this section, we present comments relating to the many peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao, and the effects of insecurity on people and on the provision of international assistance.

Peacebuilding Efforts

Peacebuilding work has been going on in Mindanao for more than fifteen years, and a lot of capacity has been supported in grassroots peace work. But peace has also been the “flavor of the month” for donor priorities in Mindanao.

“Peacebuilding, gender and human rights have become such technical terms thrown around in proposals, project headings, and when talking about results and impacts. But these are all political domains and we all need to understand this. Funding agencies and implementers have to be humble about what they are able to achieve in these domains given the complexities. We can’t expect or demand too much. Instead we need to engage in an honest dialogue about what is possible and how to do our best.”

Women’s NGO director in Davao

“There is a flawed impression that peacebuilding is new, coming from outside. It is as if we are presented with somebody else’s framework and need to adapt it. There are local ways to do this work and people are capable to take it into their hands. What needs to be supported by outsiders is capacity building and strengthening of communities and local governments.”

Program staff in a local peace and development initiative in Davao

“It would be better if before implementing a project, a seminar on culture of peace should be given to facilitate harmony among different religions”

Government officer in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“Mindanao needs outside help to resolve the conflict but there are concerns that outsiders could drive the process too much and can partner with wrong partners.”

Local NGO director in Davao

Instead of calling areas affected by conflict “war zones,” some organizations refer to places where they work as “Peace and Development Communities (PDCs)” or “Peace and Reconciliation Zones (PARs).” The assumption is that by modifying the language, they can begin to shift people’s attitudes toward new approaches to old problems.

“At first, local government wasn’t open to a community-centered peacebuilding and development approach. They were using traditional methods of planning and it took time and effort to engage them in dialogue about how a more participatory and inclusive process is better for the overall governance and confidence building.”

Program staff in a donor funded peacebuilding and development initiative in Davao

Listening Teams heard of one case study from Lanao del Norte which demonstrated how peacebuilding work generated new attitudes and responses, with the outcome of better overall coordination. In August 2008, the MILF attacked towns in Lanao del Norte, displacing 150,000 people. Coordination meetings involving the government, local NGOs, and INGOs were held which later resulted in the creation of the Area Coordination Center.

“Something that was very effective was the community dialogues and consultations. It provided a venue for people to speak out and talk about their experiences. It was an important part of trauma healing. A multi-sectoral dialogue was done with the people. [Community dialogues] is important because people can speak out and it can release tensions, and getting leaders to know this is what they want and this is where the leaders failed...during the time, the NGOs got some flak from the communities because the communities were saying, ‘Where were you when we were running? Where were you when we were hurt?’”

Provincial cooperative officer in Lanao del Norte

“It would be a good idea to conduct dialogues between the affected communities and the MILF communities, to help work through issues through dialogue. Local and international NGOs could facilitate dialogues. We would be willing to sit down and face them [MILF], because we are tired of attacks and running, and having no sustainable livelihood because of the frequent attacks of MILF”.

Male IDP in Lanao del Norte

Even the military has been involved with ‘retooling’ in an effort to contribute to regional peace and stability. In response to helping the military deal with the kinds of abuses of civilians that occurred in the past, one officer said, “Let’s try it [peace-building and conflict-resolution training]. After all, there is nothing to lose. It can help show civilians that this is the soldier now.”

Effects of Insecurity

Hundreds of thousands of persons fled their homes in Mindanao after renewed fighting between the MILF and the military beginning in August 2008. The worst affected provinces were North Cotabato, Maguindanao and Lanao. While many people have returned to their homes, tens of thousands are still residing with families, friends or in evacuation shelters where they feel more secure. For instance, one Listening Team visited 49 IDP families living in two adjacent houses in Marawi City where they are trying to survive until it is safe to return home. Most of the IDPs are caught between the desire to go home and fear of doing so, and some are also concerned about losing assistance before they are able to survive on their own again.

“We consider ourselves temporary here, and feel that we are just waiting to be provided for, for the government to provide a relocation center or land for us to live on and livelihood opportunities. It is important to get to a point where we are self-sufficient, because the aid supply will run out and we need to be able to provide for ourselves.”

Male IDP in Lanao del Sur

“If August comes and they end aid and we haven’t found livelihood yet, then the adults will survive because we are strong enough to survive hunger, but surely some of the children will die.”

Male IDP Lanao del Sur

“We have tried to sell charcoal to generate our own source of income, but because of security issues we don’t have enough space to make enough charcoal to make enough money.”

Female IDP in Lanao

“We don’t want to be dependent on aid and we want to continue our livelihood, but because of security problems we can’t go back to our homes. So we’d like to have that solved.”

Male IDP in Lanao

“We were having fun during psycho-social activities. We forgot about our problems, and we started to feel better. But when we hear about possible attacks, we are thrown back to being scared.”

Female IDP in Lanao del Norte

“Our place is peaceful but as a Muslim, every time there is conflict in other places in Mindanao, we felt insecure because of our experience of harassment and being subjected to raids. Like what happened during the bombing at the airport and wharf, bombing of the Christian church and community.”

A Muslim Woman in a village in Davao City

Outside agencies employing international staff also face challenges when attempting to visit and monitor projects where they must travel in areas with high levels of insecurity and ongoing clashes. Sometimes reluctance to do so results in the perception of highly selective aid interventions.

“Only accessible places are given aid...Communities that are easy to access are given more aid than those that cannot be accessed.”

A student in North Cotabato

“In a Peace & Order Council meeting, they decided that NGOs must have clearance from the governor and the military to do work in the area, in order to help improve security.”

Provincial Social Welfare Officer in Lanao del Norte

Reflections of the Listening Team on Peacebuilding and Insecurity

The Listening Team members were impressed with the fact that some peacebuilding groups were engaging the military to build capacities that address some of the issues they create. The Listening Teams were concerned however, by how little long-term rehabilitation assistance was forthcoming for IDPs who had been displaced for close to a year. As one team member stated, “There is no dignity staying in the evacuation center. They all want out.”

7. Mismanagement of Aid Resources

People described mismanagement of international assistance efforts resulting from corruption and the manipulation of aid for political reasons. Listening Teams also heard some good suggestions about how to counter corruption.

Corruption

Without a doubt, corruption was the most pervasive topic that surfaced during the Listening Exercise. A female civic leader in Basilan described corruption as “standard operating procedure” where a percentage was skimmed off the top of any project by everyone involved and that “contractors get richer because of international aid.” This shrinking of resources results in lower quality of projects, as one barangay captain in Basilan explained when he talked about the reporting of ‘accomplishments’—a term to signify that they were completed on paper but that the implementer did not care about durability or quality.

Communities are aware that there is assistance coming from the outside for local municipalities, and they are requesting funds, but they don’t know where their proposals go. When aid is slated for their communities, they often do not know where it goes, who is supposed to deliver it and how to access it.

“We’ve been writing a truckload of proposals already. But the proposals are just being put in a dump truck”.

President of a local development NGO in Lanao del Sur

“They told us there would be more assistance coming, but it never came. Maybe it went through the hands of the Buaya [“crocodile”—a term to describe corrupt politicians or civil servants].”

The wife of a fisherman in Misamis Oriental

“If international NGOs would course their funds through the government, it would not reach us as it should be. For example, if they would give us NIKE shoes, and they were to give it through the government, when the government brings it to the communities it would be shoes with the wrong spelling, an imitation with spelling “NAYK”, or still NIKE but with an inverted swoosh.”

Chieftain’s wife in a small indigenous community in Misamis Oriental

“These stories of deep corruption don’t surface in the peace talks because if they do, it’s counterproductive to confidence building, but if it is never truly dealt with, the conflict issues will never truly be resolved.”

Davao city resident

“Foreign aid is not utilized well. It could have saved a nation if managed well.”

Davao City resident

Manipulation of Aid for Political Reasons

People commented that in an election season, projects such as roads are often fast-tracked and that aid to certain regions and communities is provided along political identity lines for the

purposes of vote-buying. Often, local officials influence the selection of beneficiaries. For instance in Davao, teams heard about a distribution of Christmas gift certificates where the local community leaders included the names of their children instead of those of needy families.

In one barangay, a community member lamented the ‘skimming’ of funds since the community members were not supporters of the political party currently in office and did not benefit from the assistance. One civil society leader in Basilan also pointed out that sometimes all that gets accomplished is a billboard placed where no work has been done at all.

“Several months before the [local] election, you find more projects. It is [project billboards] always the big face of the President, with a small emblem of the international donor. When I see lots of projects I think ‘it must be election time.’ It is part of campaigning; to show that as an official they are doing well and they are giving projects to the people.”

Protestant Pastor in Misamis Oriental

“Because of our political system, we couldn’t avail projects from the municipality. To tell you the truth, we do not ask for finances from our municipality, we ask for assistance directly from the provincial level. If we just depend on our municipality, we wouldn’t see any buildings in our area.”

Female community member in Lanao del Norte

In one example of the manipulation of relief assistance, a large international agency was providing rice to every barangay affected by recent violence and displacement. The rice was handed down to the municipality and the mayor, and then to the DSWD, and then distributed to the community. People believe that only a percentage of the 900 bags of rice actually arrived at the community level. As a Muslim youth leader in Lanao del Sur said, “[The International agency] is providing rice that ends up being sold in the streets by some people. The needy people don’t end up getting the rice. People don’t like receiving aid from the politicians because the politicians use it as debt gratitude.”

One NGO director explained that many politicians have their private armies, and stay insulated from the people and so the people might be afraid to go against what the politicians want. Raising their voices against project mismanagement and the misappropriation of funds could expose people to retribution. A businessman in Western Mindanao told us, “Because of the lukewarm attitude, nobody dares to complain.”

“There is conflict between recipients and non-recipients when the politician decides to give some of the handouts to their friends or family even if they aren’t qualified to receive it. That’s when people who are supposed to receive feel badly towards those who do actually receive the aid, but they feel powerless to do anything about it.”

Muslim youth leader in Lanao del Sur

“Some aid is not helping those who are in need since it does not go directly to the affected people but to those friends and associates of the government officials. The government system here is unique, people can’t complain.”

Maranao youth leader in Lanao del Sur

“Politicians use aid for their preferences because they get to decide who the beneficiaries are and they get to include their friends or family members, even if they aren’t qualified for the aid. They accommodate people they know rather than the IDPs. The politicians are using it for their political ends; they are owning it as if the project is coming from them.”

Muslim Teacher and CBO worker in Lanao del Sur

“A hog fattening project was supposed to be given to the PO of their community, but sad to say the funds were used to run the campaign to push “chartered change signature campaign” for Constituent Assembly. The money would only be given to the members of the PO only if they would sign the campaign.”

A Retired teacher in Lanao del Norte

This sentiment was echoed by a Davao city official who acknowledged that, “Whatever resources we get, we will use them to further our political gains...as much as possible insulate it from political officials.” This official suggested that a way to offset this politicization of aid was to put local organizations in charge of the beneficiary selection process. She added that with the increased distrust of contractors with whom accounting is more difficult than the government, there is a need for more monitoring by the donors in the procurement process.

Countering Corruption

People offered creative and sometimes contradictory suggestions to address the issue of corruption. One recommendation was to set up a public committee that can oversee project spending. Others suggested that religious leaders should be included in oversight and monitoring processes because they have credibility in the community. One person said they should include representatives from the religious sectors right from the start of the project suggesting that, “They are trustworthy people, they can’t lie.” Another person in Davao suggested in areas where corruption is rampant, Islamic teachings on integrity and good governance are important.

“Donors should tap local NGOs, they’re the ones who connect with people. My concrete suggestion is tap the sultan, mosques...ask for the Imams (religious leaders). They live in the community, they know their people. Politicians don’t stay in their community. The religious leaders are more reliable, trustworthy and faithful.”

Maranao youth leader in Lanao del Sur

“I see a problem with implementation of projects, especially infrastructure. The strategy is to subcontract the project and the results aren’t satisfactory. A representative from the community that is perceived as not lying or accepting bribes, like someone from the religious sector, should be involved in monitoring these projects.”

Barangay police officer in Misamis Oriental

“I wish the NGO could just come straight to the community [body], because when [the funds] pass through the LGU, we cannot expect that all the aid will reach us. When the funds are directly downloaded to the community, and they have watchdogs to ensure transparency and public information on how it’s being spent, then that is people empowerment. There is no room for corruption because the fund is directly downloaded to the barangay. They really feel that they own the project. They are learning to manage their own project, and all the money goes directly

to the community. The NGOs need to be more transparent about the funds that are coming from them, and to let the community know directly the amount to expect.”

Provincial Social Welfare Officer in Lanao del Norte

Reflections of the Listening Team on Mismanagement of Resources

Listening Team members observed that people describe a range of dishonest practices as corruption. These include manipulating resources, showing favoritism, practicing nepotism, and buying votes. As one person said, it seems that at each stage someone is taking “*kupit*” (small bribes). Favoritism is a pervasive issue and the potential exists for someone to feel slighted when another receives aid. One key to a solution is to ensure transparency and to communicate publicly the reasons for giving to a particular person or community and not to another. The team grappled with what is fairness and equality in the context where there are competing groups in need. For example, how does an organization prioritize relief aid for people affected by natural disaster when there are people living in chronic poverty or displaced by conflict right next door?

One team member observed that national development priorities are driven by current events (sometimes external to the country) and are not coming from the community. These external trends are often responsive to the needs of the donor and may have little to do with the real needs at the community level or a displaced person’s reality. This scenario opens up the possibility for aid to be influenced by politics and politicians.

Turning the tables, the Listening Team members wondered whether, when the bulk of the aid given to Mindanao goes to pay the high salaries for foreign consultants, and not to the intended recipients, if this was not also a form of corruption.

8. Sustainability

People used the term *sustainability* to talk about several different effects of development and peacebuilding interventions. One person offered this definition of sustainability, “Projects should be lasting, not a one shot deal. The question project implementers should have in mind is ‘How does the fund[ing] help address issues in communities?’” A community organizer we spoke with saw sustainability as a change affecting the entire community—a transformation that people experience in their condition when their lives are “uplifted.” In order for this transformation to occur, a director of one local NGO in Davao suggested that addressing core issues should be part of sustainable development efforts:

“If we are not addressing the root causes of the problems, outside interventions will not be sustainable. If the community is empowered and there is emphasis on education and consciousness-raising, there will be more results that last. But I have a feeling that most aid programs do not attempt to address the root causes. There are many projects implemented and people want to see visible results and quantify them. Many frameworks and matrices are thrown around. But it would be better to go out and to see people planning, discussing, using popular education methods, organizing, engaging... These would be some results to talk about too.”

Local NGO director in Davao City

At the project level, examples of projects lacking long-term thinking abounded. In one

community, funders provided computers and covered the utility bills for one year. When the funding ended, the community wasn't able to pay the utility expenses and no plans were in place to raise the funds.

The following important features of sustainability were mentioned by the people teams listened to: flexibility in project design, comprehensive/holistic strategies, and project monitoring and evaluation. In addition, the idea of coordination in how aid is channeled and dependency issues are connected to the issue of sustainability as were the systems of leadership.

Flexibility in Program Design

Many people said that flexibility in program/project design and in funding processes is an important contributing factor to sustainability. People questioned if donors and implementers are flexible enough and whether they are able and willing to include input from the community or new data about the changing context and needs when making decisions about extending funding, types of programs, and target groups. People felt that such flexibility allows a redefining of how beneficiaries and the providers understand success.

One important facet of flexibility identified by some was the ability of the donor agency to accept some degree of ambiguity or even failure, and whether there was any margin of error in the project strategy and results. People argued that organizations and individuals that are given the opportunity to learn from their mistakes can improve and thrive. If donors 'pull the plug' at the slightest sign of problems in the project, then everyone loses.

“[The donors] will help us, but now that we have a problem they will leave us. I wish when they see that we are losing, they would look for ways to help us surpass it.”

Farmer in Bukidnon

One NGO in Bukidnon selected high value crops—cabbage and carrots—for production by local farmers and then provided the farmers with the necessary technical training for producing these crops, which were destined to a market in Manila. After harvest, the buyer in Manila declined to buy some of the produce because it did not meet expected quality standards. As a result, the projected revenue for the farmers was not realized. The implementing NGO saw the project as a failure because there was no profit and stopped their support, but the farmers saw many benefits in the process in learning how to produce new crops.

On the other hand, another NGO in Bukidnon approached farm enterprise development with more flexibility in their program design. As one of the recipient farmers described to us, after crop production training, small loans were offered to apply what they learned in the field. Even if the farmer failed the first time in the application, they still received additional loan support, as long as they could provide a reason for the failure (i.e. drought, flood, price depression from seasonal oversupply in market). The farmer still had to pay back the loan, with an adjusted repayment schedule, and another loan could still be taken in the future, within certain limits. This allowed the farmer to learn from the failure, improve on the method when s/he tried again, and gain the confidence that comes from succeeding the next time around; instead of failing and knowing only failure.

A director of a local NGO in Davao described most donors as having rigid, difficult and constraining reporting requirements, while the donor focus often changes in terms of geography (focusing on specific areas in the country), targeting of specific groups (i.e. conflict affected) and thematically (gender, then peacebuilding, then democracy, etc). Calling this the “fixed menu of assistance,” she argued this process meets the donors’ needs rather than the needs of the people of Mindanao.

In contrast, when donors inject funding in a strategic way (sometimes on short notice) to support important short-term or long-term processes initiated by local groups, this brings lasting outcomes. Speaking from a positive experience with one large donor agency, the director of this local NGO described grants that allowed her organization to engage in unplanned activities, such as advocacy, which were not written into the original project proposal and which did not have immediately visible results. Such flexible grants are critical for civil society organizations working on long-term change processes within their societies, as noted by several people:

“Funders who understand that and can advocate for that with their own decision makers are savvy and operate within a partnership model. [A donor agency] has been good that way giving funds for strengthening our decentralized [organizational] structure... We are working on engaging women in 14 different areas around Mindanao. The challenge of sustainability remains because when the local area ‘core groups’ become independent—will they be able to stand on their own without asking for money from the center?”

Director of a local NGO in Davao

“When they go to communities, they bring their framework and therefore their analysis but it needs adjustment.”

The Chair of a large consortium of CSOs in Zamboanga

“Sometimes aid guidelines are very restrictive and don’t deliver to the precise needs of the community.”

Lanao del Norte People’s Organization office

In cases where there has been flexibility in project implementation, it signals a level of respect which contributes toward sustainability. For instance, in Misamis Oriental, a community was slated to receive a road from an international agriculture fund even though they had already received a road project through another donor. The community asked, and had approved, to have the road project redirected to another community that needed it. A CBO community advocate noted how, “For me it shows they have respect for the community because we were consulted and informed in the decision making. If we hadn’t approved the change of funds, then the road wouldn’t go to the other Barangay.”

The Need for Comprehensive and Holistic Strategies

People emphasized that when humanitarian aid and development assistance integrates well with other aspects of local development and livelihoods rather than being narrowly focused, it is more likely to have lasting impacts on the community. Provincial government officials in all regions visited by Listening Teams insisted that development interventions, whether by local or

international NGOs, should act as a catalyst by being aligned with the local government's Integrated Area Plans. Development strategies that are not comprehensive and not holistic were widely criticized as piecemeal and unhelpful.

Comprehensive assistance is a particular challenge when it comes to assistance provided to the displaced people. By default, these people's "temporary" status makes long-term planning for development interventions difficult, but many remain in displacement centers for more than a year. In Lanao, where IDPs have lived in temporary shelters for months receiving emergency assistance, there are few alternative programs for IDPs staying in the evacuation centers for more than a year. A provincial government officer in Lanao noted that,

"An NGO that has been doing psycho-social work for 20 years is good, but it needs to go beyond that. They should partner with other NGOs to do economic development and other complimentary efforts, to help lift the people out of their situation...Programs funded by international aid should now be approached with a broader scope. They should involve more municipalities, involve the entire watershed, they should approach economic development and environmental issues with a more integrated approach, in order to compliment the development efforts that are already being done."

In areas where long-term development interventions have been implemented by local and international organizations, people brought up some examples of successful approaches at comprehensive and holistic development. In one case, international support for a sustainable fish sanctuary was also designed to protect community fishing grounds from illegal harvesting. A Barangay official in the community told the Listening Team,

"We were very grateful and happy with the foreign assistance we received. The income of our fisher folks increased and they were able to harvest more fish due to the implementation of the fish sanctuary. The organization of Bantay Dagat [literally 'watching the ocean'] had helped us in the protection of our fish sanctuary and the fish cages from illegal fishermen. Our previously organized Bantay Dagat became active too. In my own perception, the objectives of the local NGO was very good because it had done so much to help our community and somehow made change on the attitude of the people. Before, they didn't seem to care on any projects that were implemented here but when they saw that the implementation was good they showed concern and participation."

In one area of Bukidnon, the people were grateful for the assistance provided for reforestation, and as one person said, "Gambling and illegal logging stopped because of the funding." However, the reforestation project did not include stewardship and ongoing maintenance. As a result, there was limited maintenance of the forest. Over time, as dry leaves collected and were not cleared, there were incidents of forest fires. It was unclear to the local community if the forest stewardship role was agreed upon beforehand and whose responsibility it was.

The Importance of Monitoring and Evaluation

A commitment to regular monitoring speaks loudly to recipient communities about the motivations of donors and implementers by demonstrating that they care about the projects. Many people also want to be part of participatory assessment and evaluation processes.

“[Participatory Evaluation] helps us to learn about ourselves and from the process. Our donors have supported our process based on community consultations. People are engaged in a consultative process during all stages of program development and implementation. [Donor agency] representatives visit the community regularly so that they can see and talk with people on the ground. Peace outcomes can’t be seen on paper, you have to come here and see for yourself the results and benefits of the intervention. From time to time, donors send technical experts to advise us on monitoring and evaluation processes. This has been very helpful. Donors should be learning partners to local organizations. We appreciate the fact that our donors do not dictate or drive the process from above.”

Local NGO director in Davao

“Donors are so focused on outputs that they don’t see and don’t care about the constraints to development in the community.”

Western Mindanao Badjao community development worker

“Development isn’t measured by the number of projects we receive or that are being implemented, but it should be measured on the strategy or the process of how to sustain a certain project.”

A farmer in Lanao del Norte

“We have deliverables on a finished project, and we measure the end of the project. But there is no true monitoring, like an impact study that shows what the true impact is.”

A Muslim teacher and CBO worker in Lanao del Sur

Monitoring, particularly for gaps and poorly executed projects, requires staff time, which is often not always available. For instance, in North Cotabato, a well which was built for a community was contaminated due to a poor design. Because this community had been checked off as having been provided a well, they were not eligible to re-apply for another well. With limited resources and the desperate need for water in many communities, aid agencies did not dedicate staff time to sift through reports or to visit projects to determine whether a well had been built and if it was functional. Some other examples of poor monitoring included:

“We received a lot of projects, but because the areas are landslide prone, projects like the nursery are difficult to sustain. Though projects are implemented, we see implementation problems. After implementation, we don’t see any monitoring and follow-up or conducting assessments to find out how the projects are going. So, when there is a landslide and the project basically disappears, no one comes to follow-up and check on it (and see that the project has washed away).”

Farmer in a landslide-prone rural community in Lanao del Norte

A barangay secretary in rural Misamis Oriental described a project in which an NGO provided them with bars of soap at a reduced cost and which the community was meant to sell at a profit in order to fund a livelihoods project. He explained his own frustration and that of the community, saying:

“I was discouraged because I had expectations that this would help elevate our situation and that we’d have another source of additional income instead of being dependent on just agricultural work. We feel that we were used because they aren’t monitoring the project. They weren’t sincere in helping the people, because if they were sincere they would have monitored the project to see if livelihood opportunities were working for us. For example, if the project was augmenting income of the family or if you ended up with an enemy because the soap makes them feel itchy.”

One NGO director in Zamboanga suggested that donors should include visits as a way to monitor, saying: “It is your money, you conceived this assistance so you ensure it reaches those intended to receive it...you must come and see the projects.”

Listening Teams also heard stories of excessive monitoring. In Bukidnon, one indigenous woman worried that indigenous people were used as an instrument for other organizations, agencies, and even tribes to access aid and that there was excessive monitoring of their projects in order to ‘make a show’ of work being done with indigenous people. Her perception was that these other groups have discovered that including indigenous people in a proposal makes it attractive to outside funders, saying “We are only used as capital by these bright (clever) people. There is only one cow, but it was simultaneously visited by ten vehicles.”

Dependency

For many people, dependency and the sense of entitlement in some of the poorest areas of Mindanao is a major concern. One project implementer in Basilan commented that, “international aid is ineffective because of the dole out mentality.” People shared ideas on how dependency can be reduced:

“Communities should be given a chance to work rather than just be given assistance.”

A student in North Cotabato/Maguindanao

“We feel that individually we are trying hard to live and get by, but we are as well really happy when aid comes in to help us, and we will accept it and be thankful for it. But we are not dependent on those projects, because we can also do something for ourselves.”

Barangay health worker in Misamis Oriental

“Even before the foreign aid came to our barangay, we did volunteer work to improve the lives of the people. When the international assistance came, it helped us improve our lives as well as change the attitude of the people.”

President of a Fishing Organization in Misamis Oriental

When it comes to relief for displaced persons, the dynamics of dependence are more complicated. Several local government officials in the North Cotabato/Maguindanao and Lanao areas thought that IDPs do not leave the evacuation centers because of the aid provided to them. This was confirmed by some IDPs who asked, “Why do we have to return when there are goods in the evacuation center?”

“IDPs have been conditioned to think that aid will always be coming to them. It’s an issue of dependence. Someone will take care of them, whether its local funds from the mayor or international assistance.”

Liaison Officer in Marawi City

“People view it as becoming dependent so it’s important that it only lasts for a short time and that we quickly move to economic development as a means of recovery. They should quickly take part in the production of food and quickly take part in trauma healing. People keep asking ‘Is there anymore?’ and they are just waiting. However, if early on we had also given them the recovery program, it would help them to become more resilient. Recovery needs to include shelter, livelihood, trauma healing, and infrastructure.”

Municipal economic & community development officer in Lanao del Norte

The Role of Good Local Leadership

We heard a number of people describe good leadership as a key component in project sustainability. One barangay captain in Lanao said, “Development aid is nothing if the community leader doesn’t know what development is.”

In Bukidnon, the Listening Team members visited a successful women’s organic rice farm. The farm was established following the failure of the original male-dominated farming organization. From the ashes of this failure, the women rose to the top and have since managed a very successful initiative. Early quarrels with the men, who were initially jealous, were resolved because the men finally “surrendered.” As explained by the leader of the organization, as well as by the local barangay captain, “The men are easily discouraged.” Despite the success of the new female-led organization, the conversation raised some questions about the dependence of other farmers on the current leader of the organization and the need for participatory decision-making and leadership development.

This theme of leadership succession also came up in Davao where a fund was abused after the chairperson died and there was no proper turnover of the resources. Currently only one person “owns” the resources and thus the community does not benefit from them.

Reflections of the Listening Team on Sustainability

Development is a long-term process but most international assistance projects are provided within a limited timeframe, some very short-term. One of the questions raised by the Listening Team was what is realistic with regard to sustainability in short-term projects, particularly in relief situations. While the objective is to provide emergency assistance as soon as possible, humanitarian aid often fails to prepare the ground for long-term transformation of communities. Some team members noted that the *Do No Harm* framework has been helpful to their organizations in thinking through the implications of aid interventions and helping them to identify which existing community capacities to support without fracturing the social fabric that can contribute toward peace and sustainability in communities. One team member shared, “I realize from the conversations that we need to be more vigilant of the projects that we are implementing. Even when the funder has completed their project and the funds have ended, we should be better about on-going monitoring and follow-up with the project. The community still expects a lot from us and they are still depending on us.”

Listening Team members discussed how indicators of success and sustainability need to be derived from speaking directly with the community since they know their own situation, needs and indicators of success. According to one team member, “We could be parading our accomplishments and the projects we did and all the help we have given, but unless we hear it directly from the people about how it has impacted their lives, and listen to their emotions about how they really thought about it, then we can tell we have really made a difference. Because accomplishment of projects doesn’t guarantee that we have really changed their lives. Sometimes we focus too much in the details of checklists and outputs and accomplishments.”

The Listening Team members also talked about time pressures within their organizations. Some wondered how much flexibility they have in determining project timelines, types of projects, and areas where assistance will go. They considered how little time is spent in the planning stage to develop contingency plans and prepare for potential failures, noting that this kind of exercise at the beginning could generate options in case the situation changes during project implementation. Suggestions included trial runs and pilot projects to identify potential issues to address in project scale-up. Finally, team members discussed how interventions should build leadership capacity with more than just a few people in an organization.

9. Reactions to the Listening Project

Mindanao has received a tremendous amount of international assistance in recent years. With the high visibility of NGO and local government interventions, the people we listened to sometimes had a hard time separating our unstructured listening efforts from those of an evaluation or a survey or academic research. Indeed some dismissed the exercise at first as invalid because no rigorous survey tools were introduced into the conversation. Yet what emerged over the course of the conversations was gratitude that the Listening Teams had no agenda and as one person said, “...an appreciation for the opportunity to talk freely.”

“We are happy with this [Listening] exercise to tell the stories of NGOs to people outside.”

Dominican sister working as a project director

Listening Team members were surprised at the complexity and diversity of opinions expressed throughout the listening exercise, noting:

“Real conversations with real people.”

Mindanao Listening Team member

“For four days I was a student, and all the people were my teachers.”

Listening Team member in Lanao/Misamis

Several Listening Team members suggested changes in the way their NGOs carry out consultation processes as a result of what was learned during the Listening Exercise:

“Although we do assessment already in our areas, I would share with colleagues the importance of listening to feelings, perceptions, and views. We could validate our accomplishments in the area and get an understanding on the impact, and it could help us with our comprehensive action

plan. Also, now I won't consider a project an accomplishment until we know what the impact is, and not rely so much on the reports or data of the project."

"I'd like to suggest to donors that they ask the community their own definition of indicators of success and improved quality of life. The standards could be very different."

"I would propose [to my work team] that, although we conduct participatory monitoring and evaluation for all our projects, now more than ever I have realized that numbers are irrelevant because you can't read people's feelings through them. And feelings are particular to each person. I think the process of the Listening Project is enlightening, because it's often difficult to just listen, because I usually butt in with my own perceptions and opinions. But sometimes, in order to really understand the other person's feelings and perceptions is just to listen to them."

"I've heard the stories, I've learned from them, and now I want to spend more time asking questions than giving answers."