CDA COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROJECTS

The Listening Project and Development Effectiveness

The Listening Project is a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the experiences and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient end of international assistance efforts (humanitarian assistance, development cooperation, peace-building activities, human rights work, environmental conservation, etc.). CDA has organized over 20 collaborative Listening Exercises in various contexts and geographical regions to hear local people's perspectives on international aid efforts. More than 130 international and local organizations have participated and contributed more than 400 staff members to the Listening Teams that held conversations with nearly 6,000 people. Below are a number of issues that local people feel need to be addressed in order to make international assistance efforts more effective:

1. **People in aid recipient societies want more ownership and to have a greater say in their own development.** They want donors and their governments to be transparent and to seek their input on all aspects of development plans, implementation of efforts, and in measuring results. While progress has been made on increasing participation, many local government officials and local people talk about the continued imbalance of power and control when setting development agendas and determining strategies. As a local government official in Sri Lanka acknowledged, "Participatory planning is just a phrase. Money and time are limited from the donor side and an agenda has already been set long before agencies go into communities."
2. **People say that donors still provide assistance based more on national agendas and priorities than on local ones.** As a government official in Kenya said, "Projects just come because there is money and people may not need what donors bring. Policy-makers and donors sometimes push projects from the top-down through agreements made at the national level with no local input. Donors should fund a 'basket' [of options] and let them propose locally from their priorities so that communicates can solve their problems on their own."
3. **People are more concerned about "how" assistance is provided than how much is given**. People talk about "projectitis," and suggest that donors should work together more and pool their resources to address poverty and other systemic issues rather than fund individual projects or piecemeal solutions. Almost everywhere, people talk about the significant amounts of waste and mismanagement of resources in the aid system and in their governments. People want donors to reduce the number of "intermediaries" between themselves and aid recipients, and to monitor them more frequently. As a village chief in Solomon Islands said, "The misuse by middlemen often delays the completion of projects. International agencies must establish a community office. Direct donor-recipient interaction is vital for the completion of projects." Similarly a farmer in Sri Lanka said, "Foreign assistance, if given only to our government will not reach here. It will be used at Colombo level for ministries and maybe for personal use. We need direct assistance by international and local NGOs in these villages for more results to happen."
4. **People say donors should trust local people more but also monitor and verify what has been reported.** The balance between trust and control is important in addressing concerns raised by people in local communities. When donors arrive for unannounced visits, it can be perceived that they do not trust the government or their local partners. On the other hand, local people point out that things can easily be "arranged" when a donor notifies the government or a local partner of its visit beforehand. People suggest that donors do more "spot checking" and to talk to a variety of people in and outside of the chain of delivery when monitoring their investments. As someone in Mali said, "trust does not exclude control," and having rigorous monitoring systems in place does not have to reflect a lack of confidence or diminish the spirit of partnership. Regular visits help donors to better understand the local circumstances and their local partners and to be more accountable for how their assistance is used.
5. **People say that accountability is still weak** and that there continues to be more focus by governments and aid agencies on being accountable to donor countries than to aid recipients. Despite efforts at improving transparency, local people say that they lack access to the information needed to hold their government and aid agencies accountable. As a beneficiary in Kosovo said, "When internationals bring their money here, they should be careful where they spend it and who they give it to. They need more internal controlling…I have no power. I have no access to the municipality and no way to examine the financial records."
6. **People in aid recipient societies talk about how a good process is intrinsic to good results** and there are many calls for donors and governments to slow down and to communicate more effectively. People suggest that donors need to invest the necessary time in order to listen and learn about the local context and capacities, to show respect for peoples' ideas and opinions, and "to help us solve our problems together." As a coordinator of a Lebanese NGO said, "We need strategic, long-term partnerships with donors. The impact doesn't come overnight. We need to know that we can rely on their support not only tomorrow. If they want to make a change that lasts, they need to start taking longer breaths."