



What Do Local People Really Think?

Do our evaluation systems really measure what matters?

By **Dayna Brown**, Director of the Listening Program, CDA

HAVE YOU EVER wondered what local people really think about all of the various international aid agencies and projects in their communities and countries? In the rush to show results and prove impact, have you spent time listening to the views of local people about what works and what doesn't, for whom and for how long? Have you asked for feedback not just on your projects, but also on whether your organization really is *seen* to be participatory, rights-based or community driven? Do you really want to know? And if you do, would it change what you do or how you operate?

Beneficiary feedback has been getting a lot of attention lately both in the humanitarian and development communities. There are many different approaches for listening to the views of those who are meant to benefit from aid efforts. Many organizations are using new technologies such as text messaging and social media to both provide information and get feedback from people on the ground.

But actually taking the time to *listen*—spending unhurried time in conversation with people in communities, understanding their view of the world, your role in it

and whether what you do is effective or not—is one of the least common methods used by donors and aid practitioners. Instead, in typical development fashion, frameworks have been written, tools developed, pilots tested and new standards created. But at the end of the day, many local

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people still do not feel that their voices are actually *heard* by those who make the decisions that affect their lives. Why is that so?

After listening to the experiences of nearly 6,000 people in 20 aid recipient societies, as well as the experiences of more than 500 aid workers and donors themselves, the Listening Project saw a clear picture of what

has become an externally- driven aid delivery system. This system delivers projects, techniques, approaches and ideas largely developed in donor countries without sufficient understanding of the local context. The people whose lives are affected by the aid efforts are rarely if at all involved in priority setting and decision making.

Aid recipients and other local people from a broad range of contexts and backgrounds described how aid is too often provided according to predetermined criteria or to promote particular donor agendas and priorities. Local people and aid workers alike talked about how the current project cycles and funding procedures do not provide the time and resources to ensure that local people are fully engaged in the assessment, analysis and design of programs that build on their resources and meet their self-defined needs and aspirations. Many talked about the ways tick-the-box participatory processes have become pervasive and how these methods do not uphold the values and principles that they were meant to support.

As an aid worker in Senegal said, “Donors need to be honest and forthright about what they really mean by ‘participation.’ Is it simply a consultation with communities to get approval or support for a project that has already been pre-determined, or really to decide jointly and to work together?”

In the current externally driven aid delivery system, nearly every aid agency has developed policies for ensuring the participation of local people and the accompanying procedures and approaches for doing this: household surveys, community meetings, participatory needs assessments, consultations, questionnaires and many others. One might ask, participation in what? For what purpose and to what effect? In communities that receive aid, we hear many local people describe how questionnaires and community surveys often come with multiple choice questions which, they say, predetermine the range of options open to them. They describe how community meetings become one-way presentations of what is “on offer” from an aid agency with the question at the end, “do you want this?” If the answer is “no,” often the agency goes away, rather than listening for what the community might propose and what they would like to see done instead.

In their experience, many of the decisions have been made beforehand and there are few, if any, opportunities to add their ideas as the effort unfolds. On the occasions when they are asked to give feedback, it is often on projects or aspects of programs that have already been decided, rather than on the overall strategy and approach. One indigenous leader in Ecuador summarized the experience of many people with the following statement: “This is how you conjugate participation: I participate, you participate, they decide.”

Aid recipients and local leaders want *respectful and meaningful engagement* in the decisions that affect them. As a woman in Kenya said, “There should be nothing about us, without us.”

Engaging people

During listening exercises, a number of InterAction members’ staff and partners discussed how their agencies need to change the definitions of what is *real work* and what is *important work*. They talked about how their agencies could likely get better donor support if they could define and measure engagement with more rigor and precision.

Do feedback mechanisms work?

As suggested in the book **Time to Listen**, we need to change the decision-making processes to ensure that local people can speak for themselves. While we are certainly working toward that goal, at a minimum, donors, NGOs and others doing relief and development work should systematically and consistently integrate systems and processes to listen to—and respond to—feedback from those whom they aim to assist.



World Vision feedback box in South Darfur.

The **Listening Program** has recently joined forces with the **Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)** to take a closer look at feedback mechanisms with affected populations in humanitarian settings. Even with increased attention and resources invested in designing and improving feedback mechanisms, there is still a shortage of evidence about what makes these efforts effective in different contexts.

A thorough literature review of existing beneficiary feedback mechanisms identified a series of features commonly associated with the effective ones. Our case studies are paying close attention to these features: how the mechanism was designed (was the affected population consulted?); how the expectations and roles were established; the capacities of organizations and staff to establish and maintain the feedback process; the processes by which feedback is gathered and shared with stakeholders and decision makers, and how feedback triggers response and/or action (the feedback loop). Our first set of case study visits conducted with agencies in Pakistan and Sudan will soon be published on the ALNAP website.

Establishing feedback loops in emergency and conflict-affected settings requires an added vigilance and sensitivity given the safety concerns for both recipients and providers. In Darfur, where aid workers are increasingly viewed with suspicion by the national authorities, there are many barriers to engaging with aid recipients and asking for their views. This limits the scope of conversations that aid agencies can have with the people they seek to support. Our case study visit to Pakistan this past January highlighted similar challenges of restricted access to communities and reaching beyond the local gatekeepers. We were inspired to meet local and international aid staff and their partners who maintain their commitment to listening to and responding to feedback despite these barriers.

For more updates and upcoming findings from the study, visit ALNAP’s dedicated page on humanitarian feedback mechanisms at www.alnap.org/ourwork/feedback-loop.aspx.

Both aid practitioners and aid recipients suggested that aid agencies’ evaluation processes need to include assessments of how effectively their staff, partners and programs engage with a broad range of people—and with what results and impacts. Rewards and penalties should reflect the value that aid agencies say they put on ensuring the meaningful engagement of people in aid efforts that are meant to improve people’s

lives. It is notable that every story of effective aid efforts that Listening Project captured included a description of specific people who worked in ways that developed respect and trust with local people.

In fact, many aid agency staff said the skills they need to engage local people effectively—such as listening skills, language skills, cultural sensitivity, facilitation, consensus-building and collaborative

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problem-solving—need to be more valued and incorporated into recruiting processes, competency frameworks and staff evaluations. As one longtime aid worker admitted, “It’s a carrot but where’s the stick? The stick isn’t there because you’re probably not going to be fired if you’re getting your funding, reaching goals, but not getting relationships right.”

What gets measured

People in many communities talked about how feedback, monitoring and evaluation processes focus on what has been achieved in relation to the stated plans, rather than on what has happened because of what was done. The Listening Project heard questions over and over asking why aid agencies “never came back” to see what happened as a result of the assistance: not just to see if projects were sustainable, but also whether the impacts lasted and what had been the unintended side effects, both positive and negative.

People in aid recipient countries want to see results. But the results they seek are often not being measured.

Although all agencies are asked to report on impacts, many say they do not really track or report on the long-term and unexpected impacts or side effects of their actions because these are hard to trace and are not required for funding renewal. In most cases, postproject monitoring and evaluation—much less long-term cumulative impact evaluations—are not funded, particularly with today’s emphasis on value for money in the short term. As the director of a Lebanese NGO said, “What impact are you talking about? The impact is just spending money. Goods are delivered with no sense of social development. There is no interest to develop people; it is all reduced to practicality. Just know how to write a report. The focus is on skills put into the framework of outputs with no reflection included.”

Both aid recipients and aid agency staff talked about the need to measure quality rather than quantity. They noted that just because something is measurable does not mean that it is what should be assessed when looking for long-term, sustainable impacts. As an international aid worker explained, “If 10 years ago we had more solidarity but couldn’t show the results, was it because we couldn’t figure out how to measure it? We should ask: how do local people see the changes?”

People in aid recipient countries want to see results. But the results *they* seek are often not being measured. Many suggested that they should be involved in determining the actual indicators used to measure results and what is of value to them—as well as in the gathering and analysis of different types of evidence so that they can learn about what works and what does not. This is particularly true for programs aiming to bring about social change and to strengthen governance and accountability to citizens.

Many people pointed out that if they trust and have better relationships with those who mean to support their development—donors, aid agencies, NGOs, their governments—then it may not even be necessary to have a particular mechanism for gathering and responding to feedback. In a relationship in which they are seen as equals and are fully engaged in the decision-making process, they will be part of ongoing conversations and can give and respond to feedback on modifications required for the success of the projects and transformational processes in their communities.

Is your organization ready to ask tough questions about its role and relevance? Are you ready to seek not only feedback on particular aspects of its projects or programs, but also its operations, its approaches and mission more generally? And to do so on a regular basis? 🗣️

For more information, follow the Time to Listen blog (<http://cdalistingproject.wordpress.com>) or see the book, Time to Listen, which is available online at www.cda-collaborative.org.