

**The Listening Project Issue Paper:
“Discuss Together, Decide Together,
Work Together”**

September 2008

Background on the Listening Project and this Issue Paper

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international NGOs, donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, started 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. 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 international actors. Those of us who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, environmental conservation, human rights, and/or peace-building efforts can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and judgments of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such international efforts.

The Listening Teams are made up of staff from international and local aid agencies, with facilitators from CDA. We did not work from 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. Most conversations were held with one or two individuals, while in some cases small group discussions were held. In many cases, conversations were not pre-arranged, and a Listening Team would travel to a community and strike up a conversation with whomever was available and willing to talk, including those who had and had not received or been involved with international assistance. Appointments were also made with government officials and other local leaders.

Over a period of three years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty countries. So far, the Listening Project has visited 13 including Aceh (Indonesia), Angola, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Thailand (two cases), Zimbabwe, and an exploratory visit to the US Gulf Coast. Reports from each of these field visits are available on the CDA website. The *Issue Papers* present a number of common and cross-cutting issues and themes which have been heard across these various contexts for discussion, feedback and reflection by aid workers and practitioners. The Listening Project continues to listen in new locations as we present these initial findings, and we will incorporate what we hear from people in the analysis so that we can 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 involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those who have contributed deserve great appreciation for their time and generous logistical support and the insights and dedication of all the staff that participated in and supported the effort.

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. **This document does not represent a final product of the project.** While this document may be cited, it remains a working document of a collaborative learning effort.

This Issue Paper was originally entitled “Participation.” When we reread the field notes and looked carefully at the words people used, however, we found that participation was not a term most of them chose. Certainly it did come up occasionally, but even then, it often came from local people who were part of the “aid delivery chain,” and who were accustomed to aid jargon. Often, participation was a word the listeners employed to paraphrase the voices they heard. In contrast, those outside this chain often used a range of other expressions to describe what is often labeled “participation”, including “to be involved”; “to have a part in the process”; “to have a say”; “to be consulted”; “to have input and influence”; “to have a role to play”; “to join”; “to discuss together”, “to decide together,” “to work together” and so on.

Whatever its label, taking part in the international assistance process is a topic people eagerly discuss everywhere with Listening Teams. Almost uniformly—and even in emergency contexts—people want to play bigger roles in assistance efforts that are intended to improve their lives. As one person in Kenya said, “there should be nothing about us, without us.” Instead of stopping at issuing this simple desire, people highlight a number of dimensions, nuances and concerns surrounding the quality and quantity of their involvement. This short paper will consider each of these, structured around four major questions:

1. What exactly do people want to play a role in?
2. What are the most important elements of the involvement that people want?
3. Why greater involvement? And what will it accomplish?
4. What factors have facilitated or limited people’s involvement?

Be Involved “in What”?

Across the different contexts where Listening Exercises have taken place, people want to play active roles in literally the entire project cycle and aid process: from identifying needs, determining priorities, to designing and choosing projects/activities; from selecting who receives aid (and what the criteria are for selection) to implementing and managing the projects; and finally, to monitoring and evaluating the impacts. Of these, needs identification, prioritization, choosing interventions, and selecting who receives assistance were brought up most frequently.

Many people also praised agencies and programs that solicited tangible contributions—of time as well as resources—by the recipients of aid. Most people believe that contributing their time and effort to projects makes them value the work more, and increases the chances for long-term impact and sustainability. As someone in Bolivia said, “The way in which the NGO has gradually increased our obligation to provide investment has led to our taking charge of the work. In the past it was 100% that they [the NGO] contributed, then 80%, then 60%, and now it is 50%. This was done in such a manner that it generated an attitude of care for the work, so that in the future the leaders educated by [the NGO] will want to assume the responsibility for everything that has been done to date with the different institutions. It goes beyond that. We have learned that what must be done first is to work with the teachers in the area of education, get the young people involved in the development processes, and train leaders to be able to integrate themselves into the work at hand. Change in human resources is what generates progress.”

The Key Elements

Across the experiences with international assistance efforts that the Listening Project has heard about, people emphasized a few common threads when describing “real” rather than rhetorical participation. One is the ability to provide meaningful input – which they describe as more than just “consultation” where agencies are basically validating strategies and decisions that have already been made. As one woman in Thailand suggested, “You should let us participate in everything so that we can give the correct information.” To this woman and many others, participation is a way to make their voices heard in order to ensure that assistance is appropriate for the given context and needs. Listening Teams also heard that “not being listened to” can reduce people’s motivation to do their part (see the next section).

This does not mean, however, that people conceive of participation as solely “we talk, they listen.” Rather, they emphasize this point because so often they do not have two-way conversations and open-ended discussions. As one person put it, “We want to discuss together, decide together.” A group of community members in Zimbabwe echoed, “There needs to be a platform for exchange both ways.” A local development agency leader in Kenya added, “If you tell villagers to make a plan, they will say they want houses, water, etc.—the shopping list approach based on personal interest... We need to benefit from discoveries and innovations. If you want people to participate in development, you need to take them through the process of education [on development].” Seen this way, participation is not so much “who tells whom what to do” as it is about building a two-way relationship, a sharing of know-how and experiences.

Another essential element of participation appears to be the power to decide, instead of only the power to carry out what others have decided. In Ecuador, a journalist remarked, “the Cotopaxi Project belonged to the engineers, not to the communities. The participation has been in carrying things out, not in decision-making.” A fellow Ecuadorian grassroots development worker humorously quipped, “This is how the verb ‘to participate’ is conjugated: I participate, you participate, they decide.” This distinction is also borne out by the frustration Listening Teams often heard about aid agencies and their staff that behaved like “owners and bosses,” projects that were “authorized and brought in from the outside,” and agencies that “tell us what to do” or “order us.” People clearly want to be involved in making decisions – about what priorities to address, which projects go forward, who gets what, and so on – rather than having decisions made for them.

Lastly, in virtually all cases, people wanted their involvement to start at the very beginning of programs—even in emergency contexts—and to continue throughout. Many people went even further in arguing that open dialogue and relationship-building need to precede the introduction of tangible aid. Otherwise, as a spiritual leader in Thailand said, “People come from the outside and do not spend time to get to know the community and the area. They see what is on the surface and they only see problems—ups and downs are part of development and part of life.”

Be Involved “For What”?

The first and most practical reason people want to be involved is to have more appropriate and relevant projects, and communities consider this almost self-evident. As a woman in Ethiopia

said, “If we are consulted, we would be able to say what is best for us.” In Kenya someone described how, “[An international NGO] was here for 20 years, but the priorities were determined by them. We would have suggested long-term solutions to our water problems. [The INGO] is gone now, but there are still problems with water!” By contrast, in another Kenyan community, a different INGO worked with a community to start a goat-rearing project that the community wanted, creating an association to keep the farmers together, and now they are selling goats and earning a good income.

People in communities also believe they are in the best position to say who is in need and should get aid. “We know who is poor and who isn’t,” a woman in Cambodia insisted. Involving a wider group of people in targeting decisions could also avoid tensions and conflict that the distribution of assistance often generates or exacerbates. For example, in one village in Thailand, an NGO picked beneficiaries itself instead of using the community’s preferred selection process. Since then, there have been several communal conflicts, and no more communal meals as were common before the tsunami and the arrival of aid. In Sri Lanka, a local team member observed, “Involving more people on a regular basis causes less friction, less tension and encourages problem-solving.”

The level of people’s involvement also appears to strongly influence whether they come to see projects as their own. Consider the following statements: “Agencies come in with projects already planned... but we would have suggested something else if we were asked. It’s like they come with their own programs” (Zimbabwe). “We feel that they want to control our work. They say ‘we work together,’ but later we feel like what we do belongs to them and is not for us” (Thai-Burma Border). “If the international or local NGO agency is doing everything then the people will remain dependent and will not build the necessary skills for the future. We don’t want the people to feel that it is a ‘donor project’, we want people to own the project” (Zimbabwe). In one location in Thailand, we heard quite the opposite sentiment: “We built our own houses, the NGOs just gave us construction supplies and we are happy we could choose our own style.”

Different aspects of involvement seem to reinforce each other. An elder in Ethiopia said, “We are happier to do the work, however hard, if we are consulted. If we are not asked, then our hands won’t obey us to do what you want.” We heard a similar view in Zimbabwe that drew agreement all-around: “We are just told what we will get. But honestly, we can tell you that when we are involved in decisions we do our best and when we are not asked, we don’t put as much effort.”

What is more, if people engage with effort and see the work as “theirs” rather than the “donor’s”, they are also more likely to make sure the results and benefits endure after the outside agencies leave. A person in Cambodia said emphatically, “This is not an NGO road, not a government road, but the villagers’ road. We are the ones who are going to use it so we should contribute too.”

A contrast in long-term outcomes again comes from Kenya. In one location, a group of farmers recalled, “The major input from outside was the irrigation scheme built in 1987, and another one from 1992 is still working. The organization that built it consulted the community about their

problems before giving assistance and thereby helped people to build their capacity. They were consulted before the project was implemented and a partnership was struck where the farmers provided labor while the materials and equipment were provided by the organization. This has instilled ownership such that when the water gets spoilt we organize ourselves and repair the damage.” In another community, meanwhile people said, “Boreholes were dug by international organizations without community involvement... If they break down then no one takes care of them. Funds go to waste since no one is using the boreholes.”

Finally, in every country, a few people would cite personal and collective growth as a major change they hope to see from their involvement with assistance agencies. Across several locations visited by listening teams, women and men alike spoke of women’s growing abilities and rising status after being involved in aid efforts. In Zimbabwe, for instance, someone noted that “Women feel respected in these projects funded by INGOs. They have positions within the projects – e.g. the community garden – they were the two highest positions... the projects are stepping stones for bigger things. It is difficult for these women to understand other women who cry and cry and don’t come together to get into or start up projects.” Members of an Ethiopian community also said that they recognize women’s roles and participation in community meetings as a result of women’s inclusion in skills and business training provided by NGOs.

A few people also observed significant differences in communities following meaningful involvement in development programs. In an Ethiopian community where people felt very involved in planning and implementing a livestock project with an INGO, leaders said: “People are seeing the effects of working together now... villagers who were not involved are now organizing on their own... People are proud when they can work together to solve their problems.” This was noted as a change from the earlier, top-down government cooperative system. Members of an INGO-supported gardening project in Zimbabwe, when asked whether they did the same work before, said. “Yes, but individually. We never looked at what each other was doing. That coming together, teamwork, has allowed the community to help each other... We are now also donors in a way... We have also learned to help others.”

On a final note, many of these examples suggest that active involvement, when coupled with training in skills and sharing of knowledge, may be especially effective. A young woman in Bosnia told of an organization that “was here when needed, and educated local women on how to help war victims (psychological help)... When they withdrew from Zenica, this project is ongoing because women have something to do.”

What factors have facilitated or limited people’s involvement?

If active involvement is so universally sought (and the aid community routinely acknowledges its importance), why then is it missing from so many people’s experiences with international assistance efforts? In conversations with aid recipients and observers, as well as aid workers, a number of factors were identified.

The current system of international assistance

One set of clues emerged from conversations with those involved in the implementation and delivery of international assistance. These pointed to the current aid system and its structures,

time-frames, and incentives as potential constraints on getting people involved in all stages of programming (many of which are discussed in the *International Assistance as a Delivery System* Issue Paper). As an aid worker in Sri Lanka observed, “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.” The incentive system seems no more supportive. An aid agency staff in Thailand noted that donors are placing ever-greater value on quantifiable results – a trend that makes it difficult to justify substantial expenditures on more participatory efforts, whose benefits are often hard to reflect in numbers.

Organizations almost everywhere also say that, especially in the aftermath of disasters, the pressure to spend money and show results quickly can be enormous. Yet, if participation is indeed “a real exchange of ideas” or a way for those who need assistance and those trying to help them to get to know each other, then time is exactly what is required. As one person on the Thai-Burma Border recalled, “We had little connection and did not understand what the NGOs were doing... Now they understand the community better because they have been here long enough to understand... Before, they thought what they did was acceptable. It takes us two decades to be more outspoken.” Unfortunately, most aid agencies are often too strapped for time to feel they can afford such lengthy and time-consuming processes for working with people, as often the next project milestone or reporting deadline beckons.

Education and capacity

People noted that some international and local NGOs took time to prepare the community before providing them funding for activities. They helped the community to reflect on the development of the whole community and then to prioritize activities. The community felt that this helped build capacity of the villagers to look at their own development. Some people mentioned that while the process of preparation was time intensive, it was worth it in the end, saying for instance, “the preparation built our capacity and now we are able to manage things on our own.”

A Kenyan NGO leader contended: “If you want people to participate in development, you need to take them through the process of education [on development] because people can’t know everything they need to know. ‘Involving people’ has become irrelevant. You need knowledge and then you can do a rational PRA and survey.” Other people in Kenya noted the complexity of development and suggested that people need to be better prepared through training, mentoring, and gradual growth in funds.

A Cambodian NGO officer shared similar experiences, saying “People need education before they can provide real input... Involve people from the beginning, and build enough confidence so they can turn down the assistance. From our end, this means spending more time in communities directly. We often just go to listen and talk to them about community development. When people raise problems, we engage them in dialogue about how villagers could solve it. We want to build community’s decision-making capacity before introducing any hard funds and projects.”

Who is Included

People also raise numerous concerns about who donors and aid agencies talk to and invite to “participate.” Many said that those who were selected as “representatives” often do not in fact

represent most local people's interests. Nor do they adequately inform people of the content of meetings and decisions. Community members in Kenya said, "Beneficiaries are not approached directly but through middlemen, most of whom are friends and relatives. While identifying needs and types of assistance, donors must meet the whole group and not just officials." Yet another person in Kenya added, "Often there is one person who is always sent to meetings, workshops, etc. and used by NGOs to "access" communities because they are more developed." As discussed further in other Listening Project Issue Papers, local NGOs and other "middlemen" cannot always be counted on to ensure real local involvement.

On the positive side, in several places people have talked about the role that outsiders play in ensuring the inclusion of marginalized groups such as women and ethnic minorities. In Ethiopia, community members saw women who were trained or hired by NGOs play growing roles in communal meetings and their relationships within households have also changed. As some women noted, "Yes, the relationship with our husbands has improved. Now, we're contributing to the household income. Our husbands appreciate this." And the husbands said, "Because NGOs hired women for their projects, we began to see women as capable to do everything, and as more equal."

Whether people feel their involvement is "worth it"

Whether it faces systemic limitations or not, how an outside organization approaches communities and how its staff members conduct themselves can shape the way communities perceive aid efforts, and thereby influence their willingness to get involved. Several local NGOs in Cambodia contended that meaningful community involvement depended in part on the willingness of outside agency staff to solicit and value the input of receiving communities.

Across the cases, many people saw building trust as crucial in allowing development plans to translate into motivated involvement by communities. For instance, in post-Katrina New Orleans, USA, people noted that if outsiders are not committed to working there in the long-term, their community organizing efforts may not succeed beyond a few key meetings or events.

Communication

A multitude of other factors can influence whether people decide to get involved. For instance, many comments suggest that communication methods and styles can act as a barrier to their involvement. As a refugee camp resident on the Thai-Burma Border complained, "It's hard to speak English, it's not our language. Sometimes I really feel tired of going to these meetings in English." An NGO staff in Cambodia noted that "[Foreigners] ask people to reflect very quickly, but we don't express our feelings like this."

How well people are informed can likewise affect the extent of their engagement. In Kenya, several community members said, "it is also important that the community understands their role in the projects being initiated, so that they will be in a position to undertake the responsibility of running them." A person in Sri Lanka said, "if they know every step of the project from start to finish, they will be able to give good input and will be able to carry the work on in the future."

Time, Costs and Paying for Participation

Ensuring meaningful involvement of people can be costly not just to aid providers, but to aid recipients as well. People in various locations told of their difficulties in participating because of responsibilities in their personal and professional lives. This is especially so when meetings or project activities are far away or scheduled at inconvenient times.

Opinions regarding “paid participation” were also subject to differing views and nuances. A Cambodian NGO program officer observed, “Some INGO projects introduce negative impacts into the community... This happens when people are paid to attend meetings or for participating in a project.” Some believe that paying people to volunteer or attend meetings erodes the traditions of mutual self-help in communities. Concerns also arise from a fairness standpoint, as remunerating people’s involvement turns “who participates” into a question of “who gets paid” as well. And as one environmental conservation worker in Cambodia put it, “Paying people to [volunteer] is controversial, and it can cause conflict and jealousies.”

There are others, however, who believe rewards are appropriate under certain circumstances, such as when involvement in project activities requires considerable time commitments. In Zimbabwe, especially, a large number of people thought that volunteers should receive “something” for their work and time, saying things such as “no one forces the volunteers to do it and they want to, but they should get a little something—not a salary but something so that they can sometimes afford a little soap.”

Questions for Further Listening

What separates “meaningful” from “rhetorical” involvement? Most international assistance agencies utilize some form of participatory process in their work – but not all of them are regarded as such by those who have been “involved.” However, many questions remain, including:

- How much decision-making power is enough and realistic?
- What behavioral cues tell people that agencies and their staff listen and value people’s input—or that they do not?
- What are the skills and traits of aid agency staff that result in more local involvement in all phases of programming? How can those be identified, strengthened, shared and/or taught?

Are there methods and models of participation that “work” better than others?

What kind of involvement strengthens community cohesion?

When is it appropriate to pay for people to be involved and/or to participate in aid efforts?

Is the way by which people refer to projects – “our project” vs. the “NGO’s or donor’s project” – a potential sign for agencies to gauge whether the communities they work with feel truly involved?