

LISTENING PROJECT

Field Visit Report

Zimbabwe

December 2006



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.

Background on the Listening Project

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international NGOs, donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has 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 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. 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 other cases, larger groups formed and what began as small-group dialogues became, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. 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 international assistance. Appointments were also made with government officials and other local leaders.

Over a period of two years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty countries, with Zimbabwe being the sixth. The 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 involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those who were involved in Zimbabwe deserve great appreciation for their generous logistical support and the insights and dedication of all the staff that participated in and supported the effort.

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 The Listening Project in Zimbabwe

The Listening Project (LP) organized a two-week field effort in Zimbabwe in December 2006. Four major international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and one local NGO collaborated with CDA in arranging for and carrying out the field visit of the Listening Project in Zimbabwe. One of the INGOs served as the main hosting agency and each of these agencies generously provided funds, staff and other in-kind support (hospitality, transport, etc.) to the effort. CDA sent three people, including one from a participating agency, to facilitate this listening exercise.

Three groups of “listeners,” each composed of two or three Zimbabwean staff from the participating agencies and one or two international staff (from CDA and participating agencies), visited three provinces of Zimbabwe – Masvingo, Manicaland and North and South Matabeleland. Some conversations involved one or two individuals; most were with groups of three to six, with a few including as many as 10-25 people who gathered around to talk as our conversations proceeded.

The Listening Teams often began with a visit to the head of the local district administration and/or the ward councilor, both to engage them in conversation about international assistance and to ask for permission to have conversations with people in their regions. In each village, we contacted the village headman to get his support and engage him in a conversation. Several teams also spoke to agricultural development officers, business people, health workers, school principals, teachers and students. In each location, teams talked to a range of people, most of whom had been direct recipients of international aid but some of whom had not. The teams took whatever opportunities presented themselves and appreciated the willingness and openness of many people to sit and reflect with us on their observations.

In the three regions and over the course of five days, the Listening Teams held around 62 conversations with a total of about 317 people. All but a handful of the conversations occurred in rural communities that had received aid in the past or were currently receiving assistance. Listening Teams spoke with adult men and women, elderly, youth and children, some who held leadership positions, and others who were marginalized. Many conversations were held with women and men separately, or sometimes with youth apart from adults. In one province, the Listening Teams had conversations with several peri-urban and urban groups. In Matabeleland, most conversations took place with representatives of the Ndebele minority. All conversations were conducted in the local language (Shona or Ndebele) with translation provided for the expatriates by the Zimbabweans, but some people involved in our conversations in all three areas understood and spoke English.

Inevitably, what we heard represents only a small fraction of the opinions and judgments of Zimbabwean people. We therefore do not draw broad conclusions from this visit. At the end of each section below, the Listening Team reflects on some of the questions that are raised by what we heard that seem to deserve more listening and analysis.

1.2 A Note on the Context in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is currently in a state of crisis. Although some statistics are disputed and/or unreliable, the difficulty of the conditions faced by the people of Zimbabwe is evident.

The current unemployment rate is estimated to be 85%. This reflects a downward trend in the economy during the past 10 years that includes a 60% reduction in agricultural production and the near disappearance of infrastructure to support industries and small-scale commercial activity. This decline has been linked to the government’s land redistribution program initiated in 2000, however the government claims that it is largely due to “sanctions” imposed on the country by the European Union and the United States. Industrial production is estimated to have fallen to at least 50% below capacity and production of maize – Zimbabwe’s staple food –

reportedly dropped 86% between 2000 and 2005. The government attributes this to “drought” and has declared 2006-2007 an official “drought year”.

According to Zimbabwe’s Central Statistical Office (CSO), inflation is an estimated 7,500%¹ annually, making Zimbabwe’s rate of inflation the highest in the world. In response, a parallel market rate of exchange for the currency has evolved, which averages around 8-10 times the official rate, seriously distorting the market and undermining any attempt to promote economic stability.

A scarcity of jobs and resources has caused a substantial out-migration of both workers and professionals, and contributed to the breakdown of public security due to increased theft and violence. Several civil society organizations, in Zimbabwe and abroad, accuse the government of widespread human rights violations. In May 2005, a government campaign called “Operation Murambatsvina” (“Operation Drive Out Filth”) caused an estimated 700,000 people to become homeless or to lose their livelihoods, according to the United Nations.

The country’s crisis has been accompanied by a dramatic decline in social welfare. Zimbabweans’ life expectancy is the lowest in the world while the rate of HIV/AIDS infection is the 6th highest globally.² There are more orphans as a proportion of the population than in any other country in the world.³ A large proportion of the adult population who should be the sources of income and support for both their own children and their elderly parents⁴ is either dying of HIV/AIDS or leaving these dependent segments of the population behind in search of work elsewhere. Uneven rainfall patterns in different parts of the country have created additional challenges for food security within the society.

These conditions combine to create severe challenges for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in their efforts to plan and provide relief or development assistance in Zimbabwe. Most bilateral and multilateral aid to Zimbabwe has ceased [e.g. World Bank, IMF, UN]. Nevertheless, many INGOs are able to work closely with relevant line ministries and local government officials.

In recent years, deteriorating conditions in Zimbabwe have undermined the capacity for development. However, several of local and international NGOs are currently working in Zimbabwe on a wide range of projects including emergency relief, livelihood recovery, agriculture and conservation farming, income generating activities, water and sanitation, school fees and feeding, health care and HIV/AIDS education, testing and treatment.

2.0 WHAT WE HEARD

The Listening Teams identified several themes that emerged from the conversations in all three regions. These include: Types of Assistance, Targeting and Selection, Community Engagement

¹ As of figures released in August, 2007.

² According to the WHO, it is 34 for women and 37 for men.

³ UNAIDS 2006, 20.1% with a range of 13.3% to 27.6%. 2006 Democratic and Health survey: 18.1%

⁴ According to UNICEF, about 25%

and Sustainability. The Listening Team's reflections on each of the themes follow the descriptive narratives of the conversations. A final section on the current reality of aid work in Zimbabwe concludes the report.

2.1 Types and Quality of Assistance

The Listening Project Teams held conversations in three different provinces in which different levels and types of aid have been provided since independence in 1982. NGOs sometimes followed early drought relief efforts with the digging of boreholes. However, many of these were not adequately maintained and therefore went into disuse. Gradually, income-generating activities have been introduced in some regions, increasing the communities' awareness of the possibility of achieving sustainability. Villagers also cited examples of how, in the past, various development activities had been supported by government agricultural extension workers and other government agencies. The following section describes what we heard about the kinds of aid that people received and what they thought about it.

Food aid

In one of the three regions the Listening Project visited, people reported that in 1982 they had received food aid in response to drought conditions in their region. After that and prior to the 1992 drought, most areas in Zimbabwe had adequate food capacity and excess production. Even in lean years, the government kept a strategic grain reserve. This was dismantled when structural adjustment policies were introduced in the late 1980's, creating the conditions of scarcity that began with the 1992 drought and started the food aid spiral. Since 1992, food aid has been provided by international NGOs during severe drought years.

Villagers recalled in detail the difficulties during drought years and the aid they received. The drought of 1992 drew widespread international attention and response. Since then, communities have anticipated food aid, but in many cases have not been consulted or informed about the timing, quantity or nature of the aid that has arrived.

In all three regions, the recipients of food aid were quick to assert that they needed the food aid they had received. Many mentioned that people would have gone hungry or starved, especially the orphans, sick and elderly, had it not been for food aid delivered to them during drought periods. As one person said, *"Aid is very good--we almost died of hunger. But when food came we survived. When there is drought we cannot do without aid. As long as there is drought we can't survive without aid. There is no industry here, nothing else to do in times of drought."*

Some people linked food aid to school attendance, saying that the availability of food aid resulted in less absenteeism in school since children often stay home when they are hungry.

Many people reflected on the dependency of their household or their community on assistance. As one person said, *"If aid stopped tomorrow a lot of people might die for lack of food and medicines. International aid has provided the basics necessary for life. Yes, some people would be able to survive because they can make use of what they've already benefited from development projects."*

Another person worried that food aid has caused dependency, saying, *“We don’t want sadza that disables us. [Sadza is the staple food of Zimbabwe--white maize that is boiled into paste] Food aid makes us lazy. If you give them sadza they will throw away their hoes and not farm or care about the rains because they know they will get the food.”*

In one instance, the expectation that food aid will always be delivered in times of drought has undermined a traditional practice. In the past, the chief would have stored a full granary as a back up for everyone in times of drought. This practice has been abandoned, giving weight to the argument that extended food aid – without concurrent programs to promote sustainable development – is damaging.

The consensus among people we spoke to was that there would always be a need for food aid during drought periods. Some indicated that they wanted food aid only during droughts. Others saw the need extending into the “lean season” between planting and harvest. Food aid has helped people avoid starvation and protected their health, and until greater food production capacity is achieved and stores accumulated for drought years, food aid will be needed during drought years. Most communities, however, do not want to be dependent on food aid and envision a time when they will be able to thrive without it.

Aid for Children: School Feeding and Fees, Psychosocial Support, and Skills Training

The views expressed about support for school fees as aid varied considerably, from the straightforward observation that school fees were helpful, to concerns about the quality of education, to issues around the selection of beneficiaries.

People talked about how in the past, when some of the school feeding programs had fed many more children, they thought it had helped reduce absenteeism and supported many households. One person said, *“School feeding has helped to save a lot of money because heads of households don’t have to cook as many meals per day and can save on cooking oil and mealie meal.”* Another benefit for girls who received school fees was the opportunity to continue to O levels and, in this way, avoid being married off at an early age.

However, a member of an urban parish commented about the poor quality of education, saying, *“School fees are not enough as they just cover a small portion of what is needed. Kids don’t get the moral support and guidance and are failing as human beings, and really not fully benefiting from education. NGOs report numbers of kids they paid for, but never look at how many kids actually benefit from this poor schooling that we have now in Zimbabwe.”*

In one region, people urged that the school fees for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) be linked with psychosocial help. Some Home Based Caregivers also underscored the need to provide psychosocial support to school age children, but they were too overwhelmed themselves to provide it in a systematic manner. One commented, *“Kids are only getting meals from the school so it’s a big help, although sometimes it’s not enough.”*

Many observed that in the past, support for school fees was provided to OVCs. Now, however, in spite of the fact that the cost of school fees was increasing, support for school fees in recent years has usually been restricted to children who have HIV/AIDS or are AIDS orphans. To comply

with this requirement, some program workers ask to see the death certificates of children's parents in order to determine their cause of death and give the AIDS orphans preference. This has generated a debate in some of the regions over whether it is logical to distinguish between OVC and AIDS orphans.

We also heard complaints that the school fees were only available at the primary level. However, some people questioned the usefulness of getting a secondary school education when there are no jobs available even for the educated. Still others questioned outright the long-term value of any formal education given the poor prospects for finding work. Some people speculated that funds spent on school fees would be better used to provide vocational training or on other means to improve and enable livelihoods, e.g. through making investments in gardens and other income generating projects.

People also stressed the need for other life skills (cooking, health awareness, etc.) for children. A priest in an urban parish said, *"Kids aren't being exposed to trainings and don't have skills for employment. They used to have this but it was now taken over, perhaps by the police. There used to be a carpentry training center but it's now been taken over and it's difficult for them to reclaim the space, there is nothing they can do. NGOs should construct another training center to train them on life skills: carpentry, agriculture, etc. to use their hands to make money."*

Nutritional gardens

Community gardens for the cultivation of vegetables have been very popular where they have been introduced, often on the heels of food aid. The growers, most often women, said they were useful in the immediate short-term for feeding people and meeting their nutritional needs. In one region, Listening Teams heard from both the community and the district officials that community gardens had dramatically improved diets and raised standards of living for those who had access to the plots. One community commented, *"Garden inputs helped women to produce quality produce which could not be affected by disease."*

Not only do the gardens provide food, but also any excess can be sold for cash that goes directly back into the household (to pay for food, grinding maize, school fees, staples and assets), very often under the control of women. Of course, people said this is not possible in cases where markets and transportation do not exist. One person also said, *"The garden allows us to educate our kids on how to grow crops—better than the education they get from the schools."*

In one village that has received support for a community garden from international and local NGOs, people said they have developed a formal written constitution to guide membership and governance of their gardens. Located on a major highway, they have sometimes been able to sell their produce from the road, however recently reduced traffic and competition with stall owners in the town has limited their marketing options. In another region, people commented that the trainings they received to manage the garden had brought them new skills in processing, management and marketing. In other areas, we heard that gardens initiated by international aid groups have failed in the long term due to lack of inputs and/or access to markets.

Some groups remarked that they preferred gardens to food aid because it helped them become self-sustaining. Young members of one community garden group summed up the impact of the

gardens for the youth as follows, *“The gardens are very helpful. We get the vegetables and sell them to raise money for (secondary) school fees. Instead of going to the beer halls or stealing, we can work in the garden and keep busy. When we sell vegetables we can buy things and lessen the burden of the household.”*

Water projects

In the early 1980s, a number of areas had boreholes drilled for wells by international agencies. Many villagers complained that the locations were too close to the road or that the holes were at too great a distance from the villages to be useful. In addition, many people said the wells were not maintained and hence ceased to function. However, some people reported that more recent water and sanitation projects have been more effective and that placement has improved.

In several areas, improved water supply has been linked to community garden projects with dams and irrigation. One community noted, *“The dam is doing well. We don’t have to go far to get water, we can sell things from the garden and the cattle have a place to get water.”* One community paid for half of the piping needed to bring water to their gardens when they saw the positive results.

Some mentioned that the dams were good because everyone benefited from them. Others suggested that the dams made fishing possible and kept the rainwater from draining off to other areas. In another region, training in the repair of the dams had been provided, enabling the community to make its own repairs.

Access to clean water has also impacted people’s health. In one community someone commented, *“Now you hardly find anyone fetching water from the river, they now have a clean source of water.”* More accessible water often eases the burden on women who previously had to carry it over long distances.

Livestock

Women, orphans, vulnerable children and their families have been the prime beneficiaries of several small livestock (goats, chickens, etc.) programs. People discussed the fact that large livestock (cattle) projects are usually directed toward men who prefer ownership of the long-term assets as compared to the short-term lower profile livestock and gardening projects. People in some regions have benefited from organizing savings and lending groups to buy household utensils and small livestock as well.

In one region, people are still talking about the now phased-out revolving livestock program and how much they liked it. The current lack of livestock was frequently mentioned as the definition of vulnerability i.e. no investment options for the future. Many suggested that livestock programs be brought back by NGOs to create livelihoods for the young or the elderly men.

Health Care and HIV/AIDS

People in the three regions reported considerably different access to and types of healthcare, which was often dependent on the distance of a village from the nearest clinic and the extent of supplies and services available. People said that most clinics offer free family planning tablets and injections, as well as condoms. Some offer anti-malarial and tuberculosis (TB) drug

treatment. Clinics also provide initial screenings for blood pressure and other basic diagnoses, but rarely have medicines or the capacity to treat serious diseases or injuries. Most people said they had to travel substantial distances for serious medical treatment. These government-run clinics were originally intended to provide the first line of health care, but in many areas are failing to do so due to lack of resources.

In virtually every conversation, people talked about how the AIDS epidemic has severely impacted the health and welfare of the people of Zimbabwe. The National Aids Council and associated National Aids Policy have been the government's instruments to address HIV/AIDS diagnosis, education and treatment. They instituted Village Health Workers and Home Based Care Givers, however diminishing government support for these programs and workers has resulted in the increased activity of NGOs to supply services. Anti Retro-Viral Drugs (ARV) are accessed through the District hospitals, with one or two INGOs playing significant roles of support. Therefore the lines have become blurred and it is often difficult to distinguish, as beneficiaries, from whom various health services are being received. Given the high HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in Zimbabwe, people discussed health issues even in circumstances where it was not certain what role international agencies had played in the delivery of services.

People said that treatment for HIV/AIDS varied from region to region. In some areas, people said they had no access to treatment and did not know what drugs were available. Other people reported that mobile clinics had visited their region. Some of these mobile units offered food as an incentive for people to be tested for AIDS. In other places, people reported that food aid programs targeted those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. In several instances, people suggested that the INGOS provide the ARVs.

In several rural and urban areas, Home Based Caregivers (a program supported through local NGOs by international agencies) spoke about the services they provide to the chronically ill and bed-ridden. The Home Based Caregivers (HBCs) are unpaid volunteers and many are lacking anti-retroviral drugs (ARV) and report an insufficient amount of TB drugs. They said they urgently require basic supplies such as gloves in order to do their jobs properly. One HBC expressed her concerns that *"Since 2004, we are no longer given gloves or implements to use when we take care of sick and infected patients. The patients are taking tablets but there is no food – how can they get better?"* The inverse observation was expressed in a different area where INGOS were providing ARVs, where people said, *"Yes, we can grow food, but we will die without medications."*

In one region where HIV/AIDS work has been mainstreamed into NGO projects, positive impacts included not just improved health care, but also the communities' new ability to discuss HIV/AIDS openly and identify the sick without any problem. The INGOS were credited with supporting this positive change.

In one province, the Listening Project explored in some depth (with each of the women's groups) the topic of protection against AIDS by means of condom use. Women consistently said that, although men were in agreement about the use of family planning (injections and tablets), they opposed condom use with their wives. Older women reported that they sometimes refused

unprotected sex, but young women asserted that refusing sex was tantamount to ending their marriages, and their husbands would abandon them.

Even though condoms are generally available for free and their use to prevent AIDS is understood, many women reported to us that most men object to using them. What we heard from the women is *“Please tell us how to get our husbands to use condoms.”* In some cases, the women’s groups reported that men did not use condoms, while the men in the very same villages alleged that they did.

There is a general awareness that unprotected sex can lead to infection and that condoms should be used. Nevertheless, we heard on a number of occasions that people had misunderstandings about the way the virus is spread, and many asked us about possible cures and the potential availability of drug treatments.

Listening Project Reflections on Types and Quality of Assistance

Listening Project reflections on the type of assistance (**what** is received) is discussed in the subsequent sections on targeting and sustainability. Reflections on **how** aid is distributed and to **whom**, are covered in sections on selection and community engagement.

2.2 Targeting and Selection of Beneficiaries

Discussions about the targeting of assistance and the selection of beneficiaries aroused lively and significant debate. During the early years that aid was received, relief and development efforts were most often aimed at the general community. While mistakes were made and gaps existed, they were explained in terms of random thoughtlessness rather than targeted intent. In recent years, NGOs have intensified their effort to target specific populations. As a result, there is much more concern in the community about who is being included and who is not. Both recipients and non-recipients are baffled by what they perceive to be the NGOs’ apparent targeting policies.

Double Coverage and the Need for Coordination

In spite of high levels of coordination among NGOs at headquarters and in the capital, we heard of cases in the field where certain populations are sometimes targeted multiple times by more than one agency. This is apparent in small communities where some are receiving double shares while others who are also vulnerable do not qualify for any assistance. For example, in one school, teachers said they were required to prepare food for their students but not allowed to eat it. In other areas, we heard that agricultural inputs such as seeds, were furnished to the elderly and/or people living with HIV/AIDS who may not be able to make use of them, while the more able bodied, who were desperate for these inputs, did not receive them.

Who is vulnerable and defining the ‘poor’

In a number of settings, there were discussions about who should be defined as “poor” or “vulnerable.” Some suggestions were:

- *‘The poor are those who have no cattle, the elderly with no one to look after them, and the orphans. Then there are the idle people who can afford to survive and then there are the well-off.’*

- *“The way to tell if they are very, very poor – you look at children’s health, the way they are clothed, if they are able to afford school fees, the type of house they live in and livestock ownership.”*
- *One person asked, “Who is the poorest of the poor?” Their response was someone who had “No draft power, no implements, no workers, and who would use a hoe to till the land. Those with no means of self-support.”*

In the *Shona* language, the literal definition of poor people is “*orphans looking after orphans*” – in essence, children looking after children. With the highest percentage of orphans in the world - 25% - the level of poverty measured in these terms is extraordinary. In the view of people in the communities we visited, international and local aid agencies are sometimes making irrelevant and unfair distinctions among the population. By targeting specific groups, they exclude others who are in similar circumstances.

In a discussion with Village Action Aids Committee (VAAC) members about defining who is vulnerable, people said, *“The NGO payment of school fees (books and uniforms) for orphans and vulnerable children is very useful, but there are not enough resources to cover all the children who need help. Those children who don’t get covered by these NGO sponsored projects don’t go to school, since their families can’t afford schools fees. We feel that it is good that NGO projects are looking out for children, but many agencies are targeting just child-headed households or orphans under five years of age. If they had targeted all orphans that would ensure that all vulnerable children are reached and included. Our children grow up in an open community and many vulnerable ones already feel excluded.”*

Individuals in several regions observed that conditions are such that *“Everyone is poor, everyone is vulnerable.”*

Corruption and Nepotism

Many people in all three regions shared their perceptions of inequity and unfairness in the aid distribution process. These perceptions are exacerbated by the deliberate misdirection of aid due to favoritism, corruption and nepotism. Traditional local leaders, such as chiefs and headmen, were frequently cited as responsible for changing beneficiary lists. When would-be recipients confronted one headman about why their names were taken off the beneficiary list, he repeatedly blamed “the NGO computer”, although they believed that, in fact, he had manipulated the lists. In all regions, allegations were made that whoever is in charge of selection and provision of assistance often favors their relatives. In many cases, village headmen are presumed to be altering lists.

Nevertheless, one community offered that, the *“Headman should benefit in order to help others” (aid acting as an incentive)*. Several local leaders said that they, too, are poor and need to benefit from aid that is channeled into their village, and they may exaggerate the number of households in their village. For example, one headman said *“In small villages like mine, when an aid agency asks me to provide a list of 15 households/beneficiaries, I give them a list of 15. But we only have 13 families, so I add myself and my family members to the list as #14 and #15.”*

Some people misreported the number of their children, while others felt that people in control had decreased the number of reported children or deleted them from the lists entirely. These adjustments altered their eligibility for certain kinds of aid. In one district, the off-loaders of food aid allegedly extracted bribes and sold targeted food aid only to those with money.

The lack of transparency regarding the criteria and process for selecting beneficiaries was the cause of discontent in most areas. In only one of the three regions were community members generally aware of how beneficiary selections were determined. Often, the outcomes made obvious the distortions that had occurred.

Tensions and Witchcraft

Tensions and resentment often emerge as a result of these targeting and selection irregularities. A village chief in one of the regions commented, *“We have seen tensions that arise from the limited amount of food and other assistance that has been introduced into this poor area. The selection process is tense and community leaders and beneficiaries are pit against each other.”*

One person said *“During meetings people point fingers and accuse people of lying about their assets and poverty.”* We often heard reports of conflicts over how to divide the resources made available to communities, from seeds to cement. If local leaders are in a position to make these decisions, then they may be challenged by those overlooked during distribution.

In two regions, witchcraft was identified as playing a role in the selection of beneficiaries. Several people who thought they were unfairly denied aid were too afraid to step forward for fear that they would be subjected to negative witchcraft practices (put under spells or to death). Village chiefs and headmen also felt that they would become bewitched or even die as a consequence if they did not put certain names on the lists to receive aid.

Gaps in Targeting

Rural vs. Urban. People in urban and peri-urban areas expressed concerns that international agencies have very few programs targeted at the urban population and they feel overlooked. As one person said, *“NGOs are concentrated in rural areas and don’t pay attention to urban poverty.”*

Most of their concerns regarding types of aid and targeting were similar to those expressed in the villages. Peri-urban and urban dwellers are interested in engaging in income generating activities, starting small businesses and getting jobs, whereas their rural counterparts mentioned agricultural development needs. In one urban conversation someone said, *“If we had support for sewing clubs, uniform making, peanut butter making, machines to can food and knitting implements, we could set up so many projects to help people.”*

In several conversations with urban residents, people voiced complaints that NGOs do not appear to believe there is a capacity for urban agriculture, even though community gardens are prevalent in the city. One community member argued: *“We hope NGOs understand that nutrition gardens are very important in the urban areas and that they can be sustained if NGOs leave tomorrow.”*

Two major government actions also caused large-scale population shifts in recent years from urban to rural areas. In one instance, villagers mentioned that the Operation Murambatsvina had burdened them with more people to feed as victims had returned to their villages.

The health and livelihood needs of people living with HIV/AIDS are similar for both rural and urban populations. In an urban area of one region, a group of Home Based Caregivers (HBCs) debated what the long-term response to Zimbabwe's increasing number of orphans should be. They discussed how the traditional system – of having the extended family look after orphans – is breaking down as a result of the sheer scale of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and deepening poverty. There was no consensus among the caregivers, but many expressed the need for non-traditional solutions such as public institutions, community-run orphanages and an increase in foster parent programs.

The Listening Team reflected that the limited programming for urban areas might be attributed to several factors. One reason is that large scale urban poverty is relatively new. NGOs have until recently directed their humanitarian aid into rural areas. This was based on the assumption that rural populations' access to food is through local cultivation, whereas the urban populations--until recently--could buy food through income from employment. As urban employment opportunities have dramatically decreased in recent years, their vulnerability has increased, resulting in the expression of need heard by the Listening Teams.

The Disabled. In two regions, the lack of support for the disabled was mentioned repeatedly. Apparently, targeted programs for this population existed in the past, but now the perception in the communities is that the more recent focus on people who are living with HIV/AIDS and orphans has redirected aid away from the disabled, leaving them without services. In one community, people observed. *“In the past, the Department of Social Welfare would help, but now with so many orphans, only they get help. The disabled children are more needy. Those that need special attention, like the deaf mute are now being excluded because of the orphans.”* In another region a ward councilor said, *“The disabled are not getting anything and are being left out of a number of programs.”*

Concentration on HIV/AIDS status as a selection criterion

Many people felt that all orphans should be targeted for assistance, whether or not they were orphaned due to death of their parents from AIDS. Many people questioned why AIDS orphans should be singled out among other orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) for support, saying: *“When does an orphan qualify? Only when one or both parents have died of AIDS? What difference does it make whether their parents died of AIDS or something else? They are still orphans.”*

Two grandparents raising four orphaned grandchildren said, *“We don't understand the beneficiary selection process or criteria. We just hear names being called and we don't know who decides and how it is decided which child gets aid. Yesterday, an NGO distributed blankets but only our HIV+ granddaughter got one. What about her siblings, they are orphans too!”* They added about the food assistance that she receives, *“The way she was selected was by luck, we took her to the hospital and she was tested and someone was registering possible beneficiaries so she got on the list. There has never been a public meeting to talk about*

everyone's situation and discuss aid and criteria. If we didn't go to the hospital that day, we might not have been selected."

In addition, there is a growing perception that having HIV/AIDS is a prerequisite for receiving other forms of assistance. When poor and orphaned children are selected for assistance according to their HIV/AIDS status, communities question the fairness and reasonableness of NGO policies favoring these groups. One old man commented, *"People fall ill from many illnesses. They shouldn't classify the illnesses. If you care for the sick, you should care for all of the sick."*

Some people were concerned that the increased emphasis on those with HIV/AIDS does not address the long-term viability of entire communities. In one community people said, *"The problem with aid is that it is focused on the chronically and terminally ill. That should be avoided. That's not sustainable. They should be fed only and not get agricultural inputs...Aid agencies are targeting the wrong people. Active members of the community should be targeted."*

There were mixed reports from the communities regarding the extent to which NGO projects targeting HIV/AIDS infected and affected people created a stigmatization for those individuals. While some feared that there might be reluctance—and hence avoidance of support—to be identified with HIV/AIDS, others suggested that the programs had helped people raise awareness and to be more open and comfortable about HIV/AIDS.

In recent years, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe has attracted funding from international donors and NGOs, narrowing the target of many aid efforts exclusively to those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. This has the appearance of having shifted funds from general humanitarian and development activity towards the "emergency" caused by the epidemic. We heard a great deal from the communities about the impact of HIV/AIDS targeting, noting that this trend may undermine the chances of achieving overall aid goals. At the community level, narrow targeting seems illogical and unfair, both to the individual beneficiaries and to those excluded. One person put forward this concern very concisely, *"If the grannies are taking care of the kids, then who takes care of the grannies?"*

Listening Team Reflections on Concentration on HIV/AIDS as Selection Criteria

The Listening Team questioned whether there is an incentive to test positive for HIV/AIDS in light of the targeted support available to those affected. The team was concerned that NGOs are sending a message that if you test positive you will get twice as much food and it will last for a whole month instead of two weeks. With so many people poor and hungry, we question the impact of programs that distinguish AIDS orphans from the general group of 'Orphans and Vulnerable Children' (OVC). How is this affecting the tradition of sharing what food is available for each household and among the children? In cases where one family member (that is HIV+) gets assistance – all other members benefit, but the food runs out faster. Did donors think that only children living with HIV/AIDS would eat the donated food when others in the family are also hungry?

Limiting funds to only children with HIV/AIDS seems to be a shortsighted policy. If individuals do not receive an array of supporting resources—such as food, medicine, school fees, uniforms, and books—their ability to thrive could be compromised. If only children with HIV/AIDS

receive aid, the long-term vitality of the rest of the community's children could be undermined. Given that these children are the future able-bodied members of the community, some community members suggested that providing a range of assistance to them and others in the community who support them is required to achieve long-term sustainability.

The Listening Team reflected that due to the prevailing circumstances, NGOs' present role in Zimbabwe is primarily to deliver humanitarian aid. While acknowledging the communities' need for broader long-term holistic development assistance, they noted that it is not the NGOs' role to be the main provider of such a broad range of support. In fact, they noted the severe challenge they face trying to keep pace of the rapidly increasing humanitarian needs.

Pros and Cons of Wealth Ranking

There is also disagreement in communities about the appropriateness of using wealth ranking as a selection criterion for assistance. Communities question NGOs' understanding of 'vulnerability' when they rely on the presence or absence of assets as a measure of need. Very often, the people criticizing this approach suggested that they, as villagers, are in a better position to determine who really deserves aid and recommended a participatory approach, arguing that assets do not necessarily determine whether you eat during a drought. The notion that someone might be compelled to sell off their assets in order to qualify for aid raised concern because those very assets are key to creating viable livelihoods in the future. One homeowner argued that although he had inherited a home from his parents, once a drought occurred, he was just as hungry as the person next to him when the crops failed. He argued that selling his house to qualify for aid was not a long-term solution and that he should also be eligible for aid.

Targeting of Women

A large portion of the material aid and development activities occurring in Zimbabwe involves women, even though women may not have been specifically targeted. Women are more likely than any other group to be active in program implementation and to feel the impact of aid programs. For instance, food aid during drought periods becomes a woman's responsibility. In the various HIV/AIDS related programs, women are often either infected or affected participants, or they serve as care givers. In other health-related programs, they serve as volunteers and midwives. For school feeding programs, women cook the meals. Where wells have been dug, the women carry water for their households and use it for their gardens. Virtually all of the small-scale income-generating activities are in the women's domain: gardens, sewing projects, raising chickens and goats, candle and soap making, peanut grinding and oil pressing. Someone in a group of men and women stated, "*Women benefit the most from international assistance. But at the end of the day, that means that every family member benefits.*"

Women are likely to be not only the prime beneficiaries, but also bear the burden of the work. In one region, people said, "*Women take on an extra burden; in addition to household tasks, they go to the garden, volunteer etc. International aid has increased the burden of women. However, it has changed these women who participate and there is a difference between them and non-participants; their minds are more developed. They are good planners.*"

Women's groups have emerged to help with these activities and to build their organizational skills. Cash income from these activities has been held in the women's control, used for

household expenses and reinvestment in income generating activities (IGAs). Women in all three regions said that these projects, especially the IGAs, have increased their standing in the community and enhanced their personal sense of empowerment. As one woman said, *"Now that women have gotten involved, they are happy and can even give money to their husbands and now men are not the only breadwinners."*

Most women expressed interest in having more resources and support to generate income. In one province where there were no income generating activities, people asked for more support. However, in these locations, groups had fewer ideas about what they could do and less vision about how to organize than in areas where IGAs had already been introduced.

In many villages, women said that men engaged in the women's activities during the initial set up period, when wells were dug or resources were initially allocated, but usually dropped out after that. Men see themselves as "managers," allowing the women to carry on with routine implementation, and also prefer to be associated with higher status efforts such as cattle fattening, food for work, construction or digging boreholes. These activities carry greater prestige, sometimes involve faster returns, and often require less day-to-day effort.

A group of men in one area said, *"Women do all the planning and at home are doing everything. They should be on NGO committees. Women plan and sit and discuss and make decisions. They also take care of health issues, fetch water, take care of the sick."* That said, another man in the conversation added, *"Men's role in development projects is to serve as managers. If we don't manage the women, they will give things to their relatives."*

Listening Project Reflections on the Targeting of Women

The Listening Team acknowledged that even though projects had not been targeted explicitly for women, women are the most active participants and beneficiaries in the majority of the NGO supported programs. This results from both their traditional roles in the village and men's attitudes favoring certain activities for themselves.

The question arose in our discussions as to whether this meant that they were "over-burdened" or not. It was rarely women who raised this issue, except for concerns about other female volunteer caregivers who worked all day and then had to return home to do housework. In fact, in most of the conversations with women they requested that more income generating activities be initiated by NGOs. Both beneficiaries and NGOs are aware that, due to their role in the family, the empowerment of the women will affect the whole family.

There is some speculation that women in the villages out-number men, many of whom have gone to cities (or out of the country) to look for work and/or pleasure. Census data and other demographic statistics are generally not available or reliable. NGOs may need to take into account the actual demographics of the population that are available to carry out the programs to ensure that they do not overburden the women. One of the reasons for the apparent disproportionate focus on women is the type of aid being provided e.g. food aid and small-scale development projects. Another is the lack of appropriate programming targeted for youth and able-bodied or elderly men. Some of the older men suggested that they would be interested in livestock. We were talking with these groups during the beginning of the rainy season when

many of the old men were planting and working in the fields with the women, perhaps because a large portion of the younger male population has died or moved to the cities. The LP Team questioned how agencies could do more to provide positive engagement for men in projects.

Need for Youth Programming

Men and women of all age groups remarked on the lack of assistance programs targeting youth. By 'youth' people were referring to children in their early teens still attending school as well as young men and women in their twenties, including those starting families. When they were present in the conversations, these young people sometimes spoke up for themselves, expressing their eagerness to be involved in income generating projects or to receive higher education. Surprisingly, many had finished their 'O' level of schooling, but were unable to continue their education because they could not pay school fees or afford to live in towns and cities where they could receive 'A' level education. In better times, the latter might have led to their empowerment and development.

Skills for employment outside the village are also lacking. People noted that in the past, training centers prepared youths for jobs. Now, they complain that there are no jobs in the city and no projects in rural areas for them. The inputs that would help them pursue traditional agriculture are lacking, and they do not have skills for employment outside their villages when such jobs become available.

With nothing to do and no money, people said that many of the young men get involved in petty theft or hang out at the beer halls. In a number of conversations with elders, we heard outspoken views about the erosion of traditional values demonstrated by the deviant behavior of the young, including their increased beer drinking, promiscuity, lack of discipline, and lack of respect for their elders, as cultural shifts that have contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS and the breakdown of traditional society. The elders would like to see programs to occupy young people in capacity building and income generating activities. If these programs existed, many felt it would offer youth an alternative to the lifestyles that have become common.

Several elders expressed views like this one: *“The reason the youth drink is because they have become so frustrated not knowing where they are going, no opportunities, what to do with their lives, plus the alcohol is freely available. SOMETHING MUST BE DONE!”* Another village leader asked, *“What can be done for those kids? Uplifting them would help everybody.”*

There were young people who expressed on their own their interest in more programs targeted towards them. As a 16-year old who just passed his “O” level exams said, *“We need support for income generating activities, an occupation. I need capital and training. I would form a cooperative and open a general store, possibly raise pigs.”*

When the Listening Team separated one of the groups by age, young people who were members of the large community garden complained that, although they participated in the group work, their ideas were not listened to by the older people. Young members of the garden group explained it this way; *“During the planning, selection and decision-making we are not involved. The adults do everything. We do what we are told. In the gardens we are told to plant sweet*

cabbage, but we wanted to plant covo because we knew the soil was sandy. The adults said, 'you are young. You cannot tell us anything.'”

In one region the situation was assessed as follows: *“It is important for mixed age groups to be involved in selection. Young people are now stealing from older people. There are no projects for the youth in their area. They would like projects with inputs- agriculture, vegetable gardens- and training. Giving inputs is important as it can sustain them for a longer time and they can upgrade their living.”* The same group said, *“We want programs that are specifically ours. What the adults do should be theirs.”*

Listening Project Reflections on the Need for Youth Programming

Several Listening Team members explained that there used to be government subsidized vocational training programs, most often in the towns. Now, if they exist, students are required to pay for themselves, putting this resource out of reach for the vast majority and leaving the training centers idle. However, the government has organized youth groups who receive training in ‘patriotism’ and life skills.

Several Zimbabwean team members thought that the lack of youth programming was, in part, a donor-driven phenomenon, and that the funding priorities of donor agencies appear to be a significant factor in determining target groups for each year. NGOs determine their own agendas, but must also conform to their funding sources’ guidelines in order to secure resources. It was thought by some that recently a few INGOs have begun to address the question of youth programming, with the hope that it would not be misconstrued as political organizing. However, the current focus on humanitarian aid, not development aid, may also explain why youth have not been targeted.

One community group suggested that NGOs hire young people to get work experience and exposure, even to work as volunteers. A Listening Team member noted that she knew of one NGO in Zimbabwe that has done this by training young people to be peer educators about HIV/AIDS. She wondered whether NGOs could target youth by creating mentorship programs for them.

The Role of Politics in Selection and Targeting

The finding with the most significant repercussions was that political affiliation is the key criterion for receiving aid since authorities on all levels are in positions to influence the targeting and selection of potential beneficiaries. NGOs must strictly comply with government regulations and registration processes, and are required to keep District Administrators, Ward Councilors and Village Headmen informed of their activities.

One young man argued, *“The party structure should not be in the forefront. The donor should be in the forefront so that everybody will understand the selection criteria.”* Someone else added, *“Food is very political here. Mealie meal (maize meal) was sold by party members and it is creating a very inaccurate perception among people about humanitarian aid that comes from NGOs.”*

If an NGO staff member who interfaces with the community gets identified with a political party, sometimes people perceive a bias in selection by the NGO. As a result, perceptions emerge that one must belong to a certain party to be selected by the NGO for aid. Understandably, in many areas, people did not speak openly about politics. However, one newly elected ward councilor pointed out the past political machinations that had occurred at the ward level and vowed to rise to a higher standard.

Listening Project Reflections on the Role of Politics in Targeting and Selection

The perception that aid efforts are excluded from certain areas entirely (based on perceived political party alliances) presents a moral dilemma for international agencies that want to support all people in need in Zimbabwe. International NGOs are often hamstrung by a lack of access to communities and information to conduct needs assessments, and so they base their estimates on the Zimbabwe National Vulnerability Assessment Committee (Zimvac), which is a national assessment, but no detailed community based assessments are conducted.

NGOs are not able to battle the corruption at the local level or take public positions to expose partisan priorities at the national level because their very existence is always threatened. As one Zimbabwean regional coordinator of an NGO commented, *“We are standing on shaky ground that can be made into quicksand at any minute.”* This is clearly an area for further analysis and discussion within the international aid community, as this is not just an issue in Zimbabwe but in many other places around the world.

2.3 Community Engagement with local and international NGOs

There was an almost universal concern expressed in the communities that they felt excluded from the programming and decision-making process of aid efforts. They made it clear to us that they wanted to be engaged at every step, from inception to completion.

Program/Project Selection and Initiation

In the case of food aid, no one said they were consulted about their needs prior to the food delivery. As one person said, *“The role of the NGO is just to bring what they have and dump it to us. We are grateful for what we have, but we are beggars: we can’t choose, and just take what we are given.”*

For the most part, even people receiving development assistance often complained that they were not consulted about their needs or priorities. People said, *“NGOs are inflexible in the types of assistance, they don’t ask us what we need, and it is top-driven and is simply channeled down to us.”*

Although in many of our conversations the tone was less strident, the message was the same: communities would like to be consulted during the planning process. In a few instances in which District officials and ward councilors were involved in planning, they also felt that NGOs made assumptions about needs and delivered pre-packaged projects.

However, several exceptions to this trend were noted. In one province, a number of communities reported that projects were generated via a local needs assessment and communicated to a

councilor, who then went to the Rural District Council, who then, ultimately, communicated the needs to the NGOs.

In one instance in another province, the village spoke at length about a nun who had guided them through a bottom-up process that led to widespread and enthusiastic participation and capacity building. Regrettably, after her untimely death, support to that community was discontinued.

Communication and Coordination

In addition to exclusion from the planning process, communities were often left in the dark about when programs would start or what they would entail. Inadequate notice about when projects would begin and a lack of information in general were common criticisms.

In the case of food aid, not knowing when the food aid would stop has caused considerable anxiety. In one community, people said, *“We don’t know when the food aid will stop coming-- sometimes there is a month or two when it doesn’t come and we just assume that the project stopped.”*

Communities would like to see international NGOs visit more often and establish more of a local presence. When they have problems, communities do not know who to turn to for support. Without sustained relationships with NGO staff, some communities have had no choice but to contact local authorities, which is often unproductive. For the most part, communities do not know how to initiate contact with NGOs or reach them to share ongoing concerns about a project underway.

Some communities recommended that NGOs make a better effort to communicate and coordinate with one another. In one region an example was given that five organizations targeted one person, *“There is no coordination. One person gets the food, the seed, the garden etc. It’s not a problem of aid, it is a problem of coordination.”* Issues of duplication and double dipping were frequently mentioned.

In certain areas, however, good coordination among NGOs was noted. In one region where dozens of NGOs are active, regular meetings are held to coordinate efforts and keep local officials informed. Some officials talked about NGO forums at which NGOs discuss their plans with local officials.

In many instances, people said that their conversations with the Listening Team were the first time they had been asked their opinions or had any dialogue with aid providers or their representatives. People appreciated this method and being asked for their comments, though naturally they were curious to know whether what they told us would reach the ears of those who might help them in the future.

Feedback and Follow-up

More often than not, people said that there was no way for their communities to give feedback to NGOs. Communities want mechanisms for communication with the NGOs about the support they receive and the problems that arise. Many are eager to demonstrate their own accountability, but have no opportunity to do so. A few suggested that there should be an NGO point person to

maintain regular contact with each community. Another asked that they be given the chance to thank the NGOs.

People in one region commented, *“The donors just come and then leave. Wouldn’t it be good to find out whether the project was working or not?”* And *“We don’t know how to say these things. There’s an expression that you must ‘hide the instrument for hitting the dog.’ We are looking for a diplomatic way to be critical of the donors.”*

The Listening Team did hear, however, of an NGO who held a workshop with those who distributed the aid to get feedback on the process of distribution. In one region, on several occasions, we heard of a complaint desk available to communities as mandated by the NGO providing support.

From another region, a group suggested the following *“The role of the NGOs is to come and assist people. Once sustainable, they should go to another district, but then come back and check—follow-up.”* When asked if this kind of follow up would be burdensome to the community, another group responded *“No, it helps with sustainability because we want the donors to see the progress we’ve made and check on the project. We anticipate your visit because it will also give us other views from other countries, and we can share.”*

Listening Project Reflections on Community Engagement

The evidence from all our conversations suggests that most recipient communities are not being significantly engaged in aid programming and decision-making. There are common complaints that NGOs take a blanket approach and arrive with pre-planned programs, without doing appropriate needs assessment or consulting with the communities about their priorities.

The Listening Team members active in Zimbabwe acknowledged that they, as donors and implementers, are also frustrated with the limited level of community involvement under the current circumstances. They differentiated between how NGOs distribute relief aid and how they plan and implement development assistance, saying that short-term emergency relief efforts require rapid and broad delivery which generally means getting food to people who are hungry, rather than spending time on consulting the communities.

INGOs usually deliver aid through local NGOs. The Listening Team reflected that building long-term relationships between the local NGOs and the communities they serve is an important step in the process of promoting sustainable development.

One community member noted that the relationship between the NGO and the village is like the relationship between a father and a child, suggesting that if the NGOs were to leave the communities it would be like a father dying and leaving a child alone in the cold. This sparked an interesting discussion between the expatriates and the Zimbabwean members of the Listening Team. The ex-pats were concerned that such a metaphor implied a patronizing, dependent relationship, which is not how they envision their impact. By contrast, the Zimbabweans pointed out that in their culture, the learning process and respect present in the father/child relationship is consistent with how they think leadership, management, communication and technical skills should be transferred from the NGOs to the community. Listening Team members wondered

whether or not their current roles vis-à-vis the communities need to change in order for these long-term development goals to be reached.

2.4 Sustainability

Most people expressed a strong interest in projects that help build capacity and sustainability. Some of the areas that had received short-term development assistance after food aid (in drought years) have been able to generate new food resources and additional cash income. Some of these activities, most often related to gardening, had continued, while most (requiring a stream of inputs and training) had fizzled out. Nevertheless, the desire to pursue income generating activities persists, and many villages are requesting specific inputs and services. When we asked one community if the aid they received had been appropriate, they had this response: *“Since people are donating, we can’t say much. We would prefer water to porridge, to become more sustainable we need more boreholes to have our own gardens.”*

Many communities explained that they need capacity-building assistance in tandem with aid. While acknowledging the continued need for food aid during drought periods, most people are eager to be independent. They want to achieve a level of production that would carry them through dry years. As one person said, *“food aid does not equal food security.”*

As if they had read books on good development practice, many people argued that community involvement from the outset is the key to creating a sense of ownership and that only full participation can ensure long term success. In several conversations, the idea that committees should be formed within each community to handle project decisions was proposed as a good method to ensure more ownership and sustainability. Current examples of these were cited, such as the Child Protection Committees, Water and Sanitation (wat/san) Committees and other self help groups. Others suggested that cross-community learning would be very useful, enabling groups to visit other communities that have viable projects. Most envisioned a transition from aid recipient to self-sustaining community as a very long and gradual process. They expected that the NGOs now working with their communities will stay involved well into the future.

While there are many examples of communities that understand the dynamics of sustainable development, many do not. This was illustrated in one village in which they were asking that the donors give them more tractors. The Listening Team noticed as they walked around the village a virtual “tractor graveyard” where several dozen tractors were sitting idle in the field. When asked about the status of these tractors, the villagers responded that they were all broken and that is why they needed new replacements. The concept of cannibalizing some tractors to rebuild others and the technical skills required to do so was not present, and so they remained dependent on outside assistance.

In other areas, complaints were heard that inputs were provided without the appropriate training in how to use them or how to make repairs. Repeatedly, the examples of boreholes and drip tanks came up as wonderful resources, but that communities lacked the skills to maintain them and to realize their agricultural production potential.

We heard many calls for help from those not immediately benefiting from assistance. If conditions worsen, the ability of these communities to fall back on long standing cultural norms to take care of their own may be eroded. The most pressing example of this is the case of the many elderly we encountered who, under normal conditions, would be looked after in their old age by their grown children. They are now often surviving their children and assuming responsibility for raising their orphaned grandchildren. They wonder who will care for them as they age and why aid agencies do not take a more holistic approach to address the general welfare of the entire community.

When LP Teams asked the communities what advice they have for other communities working with NGOs, the most common response was to suggest that they make sure to ask for support that lead to sustainability. One village chief commented: *“The aid, the way it has been coming in drips and drabs, does not build our strength. Before you know it, the aid projects are done and we don’t think it has helped change our communities. Those who get food assistance or other help appreciate it today and tomorrow for reasons of sustenance, but these changes are short-lived.”*

A District official offered this advice, *“We ask international agencies that come into our district to build capacity so that people can begin solving their problems on their own. If the international or local NGO 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.”*

At least one example of success at sustainability through capacity building was given: An NGO built water projects that are being maintained by the community because they have been trained at management and given specific maintenance skills. The community affirmed, *“We need more projects like this, not ones that provide our communities with structures that they can’t maintain and leave them dependent on external help for longer than they need to be.”* Another said, *“International NGOs should make sure that they leave capacity behind and should not overlook locally available human resources and capacities. For example, water projects could be later fixed by the local water agency but NGOs should also provide some support or training to them.”*

Listening Project Reflections on Sustainability

The NGO staff on the Listening Teams expressed frustration that sometimes the assistance they are able to provide in Zimbabwe is ‘patchy and sporadic,’ essentially lacking an integrated, holistic approach. We have already mentioned many of the systemic obstacles that prevent NGOs, despite their good intentions, from delivering the kind of development assistance required to promote long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, against all odds, they are striving to design, fund and implement effective programs.

The agencies involved in the Listening Project recommended several ways in which complementarity and coordination can yield improved results. They agreed that if they act individually, it is much harder to deliver a holistic approach to the communities, and that the key to achieve this is to increase the extent to which agencies act in concert with each other. One

NGO noted that Zimbabwe is recognized as having a high level of coordination among NGOs through two associations-- the Joint Initiative and the National Association of NGOs (NANGO).

The agencies also acknowledged that the capacity building to fulfill these sustainability goals must be developed at every level, and that aid efforts need to include more training and monitoring, with opportunities for each community to provide feedback so that NGOs can make appropriate adjustments and improvements.

People in Zimbabwe are not in a position to say ‘no’ to aid, even when it is inappropriate or misdirected. Thus, it is the responsibility of the NGOs to advocate, whenever possible, for programs that will provide the broadest long-term benefit and the most efficient use of the resources available. Due to organizational funding cycles and preset funding priorities, NGOs argue that they cannot always commit the time and resources needed to assess the impact of their work in the context of countrywide NGO efforts. A number of the Listening Team members working in Zimbabwe said that they are still trying nonetheless to redesign the projects and retarget the assistance they currently offer so that the odds of achieving sustainability are increased.

2.5 The Role of NGOs: Reflections from the Listening Team

The most prominent theme cutting through all of the discussions with the Listening Team members is the ongoing debate about the role of NGOs (local and international) in Zimbabwe. There is considerable discussion about the extent to which the political situation in Zimbabwe constrains what they can do. The rapidly changing conditions put them at a constant disadvantage as they try to keep abreast of and address the most pressing problems. Their frustration around inadequate needs assessment, inability to target certain populations, or work in certain areas limits their work, on the one hand, and on the other, forces them to seek unique and innovative ways to address community needs.

Agencies noted that there is limited statistical data available, and that it is difficult to do needs assessments given the government’s control over access to communities. The NGO members of the Listening Team considered the rapidly changing economic, political and social environment in Zimbabwe to be the most critical constraint causing a disconnect between real community needs and the programs NGOs can deliver. They agree that better needs assessments should occur at the community level, but say that even when good mechanisms are in place from the bottom up, the external factors affecting each community are so dramatic, and often abrupt, that donor agencies face significant challenges trying to make timely programmatic responses to community needs.

A major theme in the debate about the role for NGOs has to do with the need to shift programming from humanitarian aid to development assistance, while still maintaining relief aid for emergencies. In response to the question posed: “What role do you think international NGOs should play in Zimbabwe?” One headman responded that “*NGOS can’t eradicate poverty in Zimbabwe, but they can build capacity, and then leave.*”

Given the constraints and distortions imposed by the political situation, international NGOs are asking whether it is ethical to continue their work in Zimbabwe. They worry about being complicit in furthering skewed policies. Questions arise, not only with regard to identifying beneficiaries, but also because of the extraordinary “tax” on every dollar brought into the country. Funds must be exchanged at the official exchange rate of 250 Zim \$= 1USD instead of at the parallel rate of 2000Zim\$=1USD, and this money supports the national government. These parallel (black market) rates fluctuate daily, but the scale of the difference illustrates the de facto creaming off the top of 85% of every aid dollar for the national treasury.

International NGOs are also concerned about the kind of long-term relationships and capacity they are building with their local NGO partners. Rarely in our conversations did the communities identify a particular international NGO with the aid they received, rather they attributed the aid to the local NGO. INGOs are comfortable with this view since they are committed to empowering local NGOs to assume leadership in the development process, whether or not international funding is available. Community perceptions about the NGOs sometimes conflicted with how the NGOs perceived their role and experience in implementing projects. One agency suggested that NGOs address why these differences in perceptions occur, how they might negatively affect the work in the field and what could be done to correct them. For example, by becoming pro-active to counter misperceptions about the focus on HIV/AIDS targeting, increasing stigmatization and resentment could be averted.

Due to worsening conditions in Zimbabwe, some NGOs are concerned that the effects of development assistance have decreased substantially, lessening the cost-effectiveness dramatically. As school fees and the rate of inflation rise, for example, the same level of funding will not go nearly as far as it used to. As economic conditions worsen, the number of people with HIV/AIDS and the number of orphans increases, and it is hard to assess the impact of aid. Donor assistance may only be keeping the status quo from getting much worse, rather than contributing to development. In spite of these conditions, the Listening Team heard that the impact of donor funds is still substantial, even if it is less apparent.

Some donors question whether working within the constraints of the Zimbabwean government policies is justified and if it may indirectly prolong people’s suffering. Nevertheless, they also maintain the view that Zimbabwe has had recent experience with prosperity and a history of some civic participation, thus providing guarded optimism for its potential in the future. The Listening Team encountered substantial positive feedback from those who are benefiting from current aid efforts. This suggests that there is good reason to continue to respond to the challenges of programming for relief aid and development assistance in Zimbabwe.