

# Listening to Improve Accountability

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Over years of organizing collaborative learning projects (*Do No Harm*, *Reflecting on Peace Practice*, and others), questions have arisen about the cumulative effects of international assistance on people, their communities and their societies. So, in 2005 we launched the Listening Project to explore the ideas and insights of people who live in societies on the recipient side of international assistance efforts such as humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding. It is based on the belief that those who have intentionally crossed borders to attempt to help other people – and those who work with them – must both listen carefully to the wise judgments of people in those societies about how these efforts have gone and be accountable to them.

The Listening Project has facilitated listening exercises in Aceh (Indonesia), Angola, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kosovo, New Orleans, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Zimbabwe. Over 225 staff members from more than 60 local and international NGOs have participated in the listening exercises to date, holding about 1,300 conversations with approximately 3,000 people. In each location, teams listened to a broad range of people, including those who have directly received assistance, people who have not received assistance but have observed it, and those who have been a part of the chain of delivery. The reports from these listening exercises capture what we have heard from people as

they reflected on and analyzed the impacts of international assistance for their societies, and provide the evidence for the following initial findings.

## **The systems and structures of international assistance limit opportunities and incentives for listening in open-ended ways to people in recipient societies.**

The evidence seems to show that international assistance agencies have developed often efficient delivery systems that are often more concerned with getting services and goods to people than with getting to know and respect them.

In the places we visited, many people referred to international assistance as “an industry” that is professionalized to meet delivery standards by employing certain kinds of people, organizing needs assessments, planning and project activities according to specified systems, and reporting on pre-determined indicators (often related to what is delivered at what cost). More and more, NGOs are using the terminology of “customers” or “clients” (i.e., “industry” language) rather than “beneficiaries” to describe those whom their efforts are intended to help. Donors also focus on results-based management, a concept borrowed from the private sector.

People tell us that they do not get to select the agencies that work in their communities, and that they often have no way to hold the agencies accountable when the work is badly done or, worse, when it

does harm. Local people know that agencies provide reports to donors, but many question why they do not get to see these reports and why donors often do not check whether the assistance they have provided has made a positive difference in recipients’ lives.

## **Why is this important?**

If this evidence is borne out in future conversations, the challenges to the international community cannot be over-stated. It suggests the need for a fundamental rethinking of the purposes and values of international assistance and, subsequently, a redesign of our systems to re-integrate the importance of building relationships (as well as delivering goods and services).

## **The systems of international assistance bias the ways that agencies and aid workers listen and do not listen, what they listen to, where and when they listen, and to whom they listen.**

This is related to the first finding. If the system is designed to deliver goods and services, the point of listening to people in communities is to determine whether the goods and services have been delivered well: Were they the right amount, of the right quality, delivered to the right people and on time? Often the focus is on gathering this information in an “efficient” way to reduce costs of delivery and to ensure speed, leaving less and less time to listen to what people think about the effects of the assistance they received.

When aid agency staff are listening for assessments of their service

delivery performance, they listen to people who are in (not outside of) the chain of delivery and they listen primarily for assessments of the efficiency or effectiveness of their projects. They often do not see the importance of, and are not encouraged or rewarded for, taking the time to talk to broader groups of people about a broader range of issues.

As a result, most aid workers hear a lot about the problems of projects that fail to deliver what people want. Through the Listening Project, we also hear many comments about this, some appreciative and many critical. Some of the comments are familiar and have been around for many years: "The wrong people got the aid," "you have to know somebody to get aid," "the agency sent food we could not use," "the seeds got here too late to plant," and so on. What has become clear is that the specific mistakes these comments highlight add up to a much larger issue that cannot be addressed through better project planning or tinkering with aspects of delivery.

The larger issue has to do with how to relate to people in the countries where agencies work. The evidence seems to show that the bias of listening to people involved in projects about these projects leaves out a very large part of what is required to understand the larger context that people live within, and to work with local people to diagnose and thus find ways of addressing the circumstances that perpetuate their poverty or marginalization.

With remarkable consistency across many locations, including areas that have experienced disasters such as the tsunami in 2004, people say that aid agencies should "take more time," "invest the necessary time" and "go more slowly" be-



Photo: courtesy of Diego Devesa Laux, The Listening Project.

cause time is necessary in order to "listen to people," "learn about the real circumstances," "get to know people," and "show respect for people's ideas and opinions."

#### **Why is this important?**

If we listen to a wider range of people about a broader range of issues, we hear very different things. And, if we hear these things clearly, we will be more likely to create mechanisms and systems for addressing basic issues, rather than perpetuating broad disappointment that "international assistance saves our lives, but it does not change them."

#### **In many cases, the amount of aid and of money is not seen as the problem.**

In one area, people spoke of the "excessive generosity of international agencies" noting that they received "too much." In every location the Listening Project has visited people talk about the significant amounts of waste and mismanagement of resources, noting, for instance, that "with all of the aid that has come into Kenya, it should be

a heaven!" They continually note how little has been accomplished in relation to the resources that have been provided.

People tell Listening Project teams their ideas about how the "massive funds" of outsiders could be better spent. For example, some point out that if agencies could analyze the situation with local people, they could pool their funds for greater impact. One example concerned a drought-prone location where separate agencies undertook small water projects. People suggested that if these agencies had combined their resources, they could have developed a comprehensive, lasting water system. In other countries, Listening Project teams have heard similar comments that the available (and abundant) resources of aid could do more to address deeper, systemic problems if aid agencies would analyze the situation with local people and combine resources, rather than each running its own projects.

There are two interesting aspects of this commentary. The first has to

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do with waste. In several different countries, people have described the “water bottle” effect where assistance is passed from donors to international NGOs or contractors to local NGOs or sub-contractors to community-based organizations and finally to people in the community, so that the last in line gets only a very small amount of the water after so many have taken a sip. Even with this “wastage,” however, people talk more often about how little has been accomplished with all of the money that has been spent rather than about the importance of having more.

Second, the Listening Project has heard very few complaints about the quantity of resources available. Of much greater concern to people is how aid is given. Many resent what they call “pre-packaged” projects because these, they say, signal arrogance and disrespect by international agencies acting as if local people do not have the analytic ability and wisdom to engage on major issues affecting their lives.

#### **Why is this important?**

There is much discussion among donors and NGOs about “coherence” and “coordination” as solutions to international aid’s ineffectiveness. Both of these ideas presume that it is possible to establish an overall strategy or approach that will bring desired results. While the idea that aid agencies should work with each other, rather than each designing and implementing its own projects, is appreciated by local people, they also emphasize the centrality of their own roles in this “working together” approach. If we listen to the insights of people in recipient societies, any attempts to coordinate or achieve coherence must start with and totally respect their analyses.

Further, many of us who work internationally continually try to raise more money, increase our donor bases and provide more resources. If we listen to the ideas coming from people in recipient societies, we must adjust our thinking about the relative importance of getting more money and instead find better ways of responding to local capacities and insights and to be accountable to them. ●●○

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