

The Listening Project Issue Paper

Presence: “Why Being Here Matters”

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.

Being Here Matters

People across many different contexts tell us that they would like to see those who are funding and implementing international assistance efforts in their communities more often. A call for shortening the distance between recipient communities, aid providers and donors was heard in many areas where both emergency aid and development assistance were provided. Recipients and observers of international assistance in these diverse contexts pointed out that donors and implementers ought to visit and spend more time with the people whose recovery and development they seek to support.

It is a well known fact that over the last decade many donors and international assistance agencies have reduced their field presence in order to increase self-reliance by their local staff and partners, to reduce budgets, and to avoid creating dependency. And yet Listening Teams in many countries heard many people at the community level calling for more “face-to-face” communication, for stronger relationships and more frequent and longer visits by donors and other decision-makers. On the other hand, sometimes in the same conversation, people would also remark about the wastefulness of certain development interventions and the need to reduce unnecessary spending. How do we reconcile these seemingly incongruous requests?

This paper explores the different dimensions of this issue of presence: who is it that communities want to see, how often and for what purpose, what people think would be gained from more presence and what the financial and other implications of frequent visits or long-term presence are for outsiders.

Why is Presence Important?

People in communities request the presence of donors and international aid agency staff for a number of reasons: to understand the “real” needs and situation on the ground, to verify proposals and reports, to monitor aid interventions and assess long-term impacts, to increase chances of sustainability, to be accountable, to provide protection, and most importantly to have better relationships. In some areas where people talked about the overarching international agendas and donor priorities affecting their everyday lives, people also wanted direct communication with donors in order to “affect the agenda and have a say” (see the *“Cascading Effects of International Agendas and Priorities”* Issue Paper for more discussion on this issue).

“Be Here to Understand Us and Our Needs”

The presence of donors and aid agency staff was seen as critical to the process of determining what programs and projects are most appropriate and who needs assistance. In Kenya, several people said things such as “Development agencies have to live with communities, but instead proxies [NGOs, CBOs] live with them... If agencies live there, they can identify more and better people to be involved in the work. They need to see how people live and who to work with, and then can identify needs and support the communities.” People felt that while donors tell them that “we don’t want to be here to breathe down your back,” they still want them to be present to show their concern, to understand the difficulties, and to ensure more relevant assistance. In several regions in Kenya, people positively noted that church missions and outposts and others

who are based in communities for a long time are better able to identify who needs assistance, provide more appropriate assistance, monitor regularly, and therefore have a greater impact.

In Sri Lanka, people suggested to a Listening team that, “INGOs should come directly to the communities and understand their needs first. They should discuss rather than bring formal documents. It should be similar to what you are doing today.” Likewise, in Cambodia, people said, “Donors should meet with the people, to find out their real needs before giving aid to the people. Villagers know their real needs; they would like to tell donors” and “In order to improve the effectiveness of aid, a donor needs to come and see the real situation. They can see the problems for themselves and we can jointly come up with solutions.” A Cambodian staff in a local development agency suggested that “Donors should send their staff to visit in the field every six months and some consultants, experts and volunteers can come and live in the community for 15 days to really understand the context.”

In the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, many ethnic Karen community members were concerned about the limited level of understanding of the local culture and issues facing the camp residents by outside development workers. Leaders of Karen community-based organizations working in the camps repeatedly talked about the need for long-term and frequent visits by decision-makers who are behind the development efforts they see supported in their community. A Karen CBO leader told one Listening team that “INGO staff do not have time to share feelings or care, they just do their job. This is because what seems to matter more in programming are the numbers, the percentages, the ‘indicators’ in a quantitative way, but not often are the INGO staff able to learn about the local people’s culture, traditions, customs, world perspectives, characteristics, that is, the qualitative side of life. Research and surveys are also often done for numbers and statistics, not for contexts and identities....NGOs have different policies, procedures and opinions. Many staff don’t stay long enough to understand the local situation and hand-offs are not being done very carefully. There is a lack of time for NGO workers to get to know the local people.”

“Be Here to Monitor and Assess Impacts”

Many people in recipient societies are mystified that donors and international agencies give so much money and do not care to see what happened. In Zimbabwe, people said, “The donors just come and then leave. Wouldn’t it be good to find out whether the project was working or not?” The Ecuador Listening team noted that one of the most important improvements in the minds of a large number of people – recipients and observers of aid efforts alike – was a longer period of commitment and contact on the part of NGOs, not necessarily in the form of additional funding, but certainly in the form of follow-up, be that post-project monitoring and technical assistance or long-term evaluations of project impact and strategy. People felt that NGOs and agencies often left the community abruptly, sometimes virtually unannounced, and that exit strategies were as important as entry strategies.

Virtually each Listening Exercise involved conversations in recipient communities where people were seriously concerned about corruption, unfair beneficiary selection processes and undue influence of local leaders and political figures on the aid process. Frequent monitoring and verifying missions by agency staff, both national and expatriate, are often requested to correct

and resolve such problems. In an ethnic minority Phnong village in Cambodia, people asserted that “Donors should come directly to our community and monitor better. This way there will be more resources directly benefiting people and there will be less corruption.” In Kenya, many people suggested that “Donors should audit and monitor on the ground. Don’t rely on proposals, reports, and staff to tell the truth. They need to do unannounced visits to projects and partners. The majority of wazungu (foreigners) trust local staff (directors/heads) and don’t talk to other staff or communities to get their input... The victim is the community when donors don’t have controls.” Conversely, a shorter distance between the community and the aid providers was also seen as an opportunity by recipients to verify and monitor the spending of the aid agencies and to ensure transparency. A Kenyan farmer suggested, “Let the aid come closer to the people. We are able to monitor funds when the organizations are closer to us than when they are based in headquarters or Nairobi. We are also able to interact with them.”

People pointed out that more on-the-ground monitoring should be done by donors and aid agency program staff. In Sri Lanka, a person in a tsunami-affected community told the Listening team, “Foreign assistance concentrates on reports. If they are well prepared, the reality is not considered.” The director of a local organization in Cambodia said, “We get monitoring visits every six months. We would like to see our donor here more often. But unfortunately when they believe that programs are going well, they just don’t visit as often....We want the donors to come and see the real situation, not just read about it in our reports or other sources.” A local community leader in Cambodia also noted that “The project coordinator visits every three months, the international donor one time a year—not much. It’s good if they visit a lot to prevent misunderstandings and encourage us—not only to submit the report.”

In Kosovo, people were frustrated that donors were so far removed from the assistance process, seemed unfamiliar with specific projects, and did not bother to come to communities to see how their money was being spent and whether or not it matched the needs of the intended beneficiaries. Several people across a number of locations said, “If you were here, you would know.” In Thailand, Listening Teams heard of several cases where internationals were present only for a photo opportunity, as one villager described: “There is only one time we saw staff of one of these international NGOs come and meet us. They came to unveil the sign about their funding here. We haven’t seen anyone that belongs to that sign since then.”

“Be Here for Accountability and to Take Responsibility”

People in recipient communities have shared their frustration with the poor quality of assistance, harmful impacts of some humanitarian, development and peacebuilding interventions, and unmet expectations. People feel powerless when they try to raise concerns or complaints, but cannot find any agency representatives to demand more information from or to complain to. As a result, many people ask for international agencies to be more accessible while implementing projects in their communities and to visit after projects come to an end in order to foster mutual accountability. In cases where people have been disappointed with implementation aspects or the decisions and behaviors of project staff, people are specifically asking for opportunities to make their grievances known and to hold the responsible people and institutions accountable.

The Zimbabwe Listening team heard people in several communities say that they 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. 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. Many people commented that when they try to reach aid agency offices, “they don’t answer the office phone and we can’t find them.”

In Kenya, while people acknowledged the local culture of corruption that has existed in the country for many years, they also suggested that donors have played a role in perpetuating it. They cited the lack of monitoring and verification of reports and proposals, as well as the lack of presence on the ground and infrequent visits as playing a role in corruption within the aid system. People spoke about the great distance between those who make decisions and those who have to live with the consequences of these decisions. A Kenyan staff of a local NGO said, “The decisions are made at the top and the person at the top does not come to the ground to consult or find out the actual situation. It is also important for those donors to come down and see what we are doing, they need to come, see and experience, not just hear what others say.”

“Be Here for Collegueship, Mutual Learning and Partnership”

Requests for more presence and frequent visits by decision-makers in the international aid system are not limited to situations when there are problems with poor project design, implementation and accountability. People are asking for different types of relationships with aid providers. *They want the respect that direct contact implies and reinforces. They want to be known by the people who come to work with them. They often do not want more things; what they want are colleagues to engage with them in problem-solving. As the Bolivia Listening Teams found, “What most of the people we talked with wanted far more of was continuity, meaning some level of continued contact with assistance agencies, not necessarily in the form of additional funding.”*¹

In Zimbabwe, people told us “We want to know who is who and know a contact person within an agency – someone who comes and introduces themselves and says what they are planning to do.” Also in Zimbabwe, women participants in a donor-funded community garden project suggested that, “Donors should come and visit projects they have funded because it encourages people. We prefer visitors to come and learn from us and spread the knowledge—cross pollination—it will spread around the world. The knowledge will be taken to other people and there will be mutual benefits on all sides.” When people were asked if regular follow up activities would be burdensome to the community, a group of recipients in a Zimbabwe village responded “No, it helps with sustainability because we want the donors to see the progress we have made and to check on the project. We anticipate your visit because it will also give us other views from other countries, and we can share.”

In Sri Lanka, local NGOs who are funded by international donors expressed a strong desire to work more closely with their donors and other agencies in a fashion that is not “top down.”

¹ The italicized sections of this paper are excerpted from an article by Mary B. Anderson on “THE GIVING-RECEIVING RELATIONSHIP: INHERENTLY UNEQUAL OR UNNECESSARILY SO?” in the DARA Annual Report published in Fall 2008.

Several local implementing partners described their current relationship with their donor as limited in that it is usually reduced to submitting a proposal, receiving a check and sending periodic written reports. The leader of a local CBO in Sri Lanka said, “When we are ready to present a new project, we can write the proposal really well and present our ideas creatively and receive funding. But during implementation we are not always sure what we are doing, and INGO monitoring processes are weak. We need support, advice and collaboration with our donors. We don’t want them to be just donors, we want colleagues and we want to share ideas and exchange best practices.”

Similarly, Kenya Listening Teams noted that in the call for more presence was a desire among people to share experiences with outsiders. They want donors and partners who can listen and also bring other ideas and programs for implementation. Some people said that they are tired of research without outcomes, noting that there have been many assessments and visits by donors, often without any follow up or feedback. A priest in Kenya emphatically called on donors to stop giving handouts, suggesting that “Donors should use their billions wisely or keep it! Encourage donors to give their time instead of money and encourage local participation to import skills.”

“Be Here to Provide Protection”

In many areas affected by violent conflict and instability, the presence of international agencies and expatriate staff is recognized by communities as vital for protection of the civilian population and for improving the security situation in refugee and IDP camps. Internally displaced people in Puttalam province of Sri Lanka recalled how crucial several international agencies were in helping to locate and release family members soon after the forced expulsion of the Muslim community from Jaffna. In Bosnia, people said that the presence of the international police and peacekeeping forces was very important and that they felt more secure during the refugee return process, since international staff seemed more neutral than locals.

In Kosovo, minorities said that, for the most part, they felt safe traveling across ethnic communal lines due to the international presence. In Cambodia, former refugees who spent several years in camps in Thailand recalled instances when individual expatriates (whom they still remember by name) provided safety and protection from abuses inflicted by camp guards and the local population. In Aceh, the international presence was linked by many people to the progress in peace negotiations. As one Acehnese man said, “The international presence creates a pitch [i.e. a space/sports field] for peace.”

In conflict-affected areas and IDP camps in the east of Sri Lanka, as well as in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, camp residents called for more presence and verification missions by staff of international agencies whose mandates explicitly state the commitment to protect civilians.

Who Do People Want Present?

More and more international aid organizations increasingly rely on “local” partners to carry out needs assessments, implement projects and monitor results. While supporting local capacity is important, international agency staff members responsible for the bulk of funding and

programming decisions do not seem to be spending enough time to understand the contexts and the people they aim to assist or those they have chosen to work with. An overwhelming number of comments point to the need for presence that will increase fairness in the distribution, implementation and monitoring of assistance efforts

This does not necessarily mean more visits by expatriates only, although in several areas people specifically asked for the presence of internationals when there were strong concerns about political or other influences on decisions about who or what areas receive aid. As mentioned earlier, expatriate presence was also closely linked with an expectation of protection as heard from former refugees, internally displaced people and minorities in Bosnia, Cambodia, Kenya, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, and on the Thai-Burma border.

Many feel that internationals are fairer than locals who historically are enmeshed in systems of patronage. When internationals follow through on the allocation of goods, the right people are more apt to get them. In many countries, people point out that local staff, who might want to be impartial, nonetheless are also part of the local systems and cannot operate outside of these norms. For example, in Kosovo as well as in Ethiopia and several other places, people said that they would have preferred more international and fewer local staff, believing that assistance would have been provided more fairly if expatriates had been more involved in the decision-making at the community level.

In Ethiopia, people suggested, “Aid workers should live with us, see how we are living.” In Aceh, people said, “Writing down notes on a piece of paper can be lost, but coming here and staying with us for a week can imprint our experiences on your heart.” In Bolivia, people said, “They arrive; they help us; they leave. And we never hear from them again. So, what did we do wrong?” In Kosovo, people suggested that, “Internationals should come here directly to discuss what work is needed.”

Many of the comments people make indicate that they connect the building of relationships with presence and regular interactions. They often say that they understand international assistance to be built on such values as respect, concern, caring, and solidarity. People asking for aid workers to “eat with us, live among us and build trust” are also asking for opportunities to share knowledge and learn from each other, which go beyond one monitoring visit, a meeting or a workshop. Comments such as “be with us more to teach us” have often come as a request for outsiders who can think out of the box and offer practical and effective ideas to address their challenges.

In several areas, people also raised concerns with the quality of the international staff. A number of Kosovars, for example, were offended by international staff who treated locals as “primitives” and noted that after the emergency phase was over and as time went on, less competent, unprofessional and uncommitted expatriates were assigned to many posts in Kosovo. People in Bosnia also noted that some of the expatriates who were managing projects were very inexperienced and seemed to come to Bosnia for the adventure or the salary, rather than to truly get to know the communities and to mentor their staff.

People in a number of places were also concerned with how the presence of outsiders can impact the traditional cultural norms and practices. They described cultural changes that have resulted from the presence of outsiders providing international assistance, as well as their projects, some of which have challenged and changed long-held traditions. Projects that aim to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases by promoting the use of condoms were often seen as culturally inappropriate in their approach, especially when outsiders were in charge of designing and implementing project activities. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand and on the Thai-Burma border, people raised strong concerns about religious proselytizing and the imposition of values such as democracy and human rights without prior dialogue with community members. A Sri Lankan trainer said, “The agencies bring gender programs in and begin trouble with the family. They are spoiling the culture and setting.” In Ecuador, an indigenous woman said, “The truth is that during the implementation of a project of external aid, the community undergoes a strong process of ‘deculturalization’ due to the presence of external people. Afterwards, when the project leaves, the community is left culturally diminished and dependent on what comes from outside.”

The Cost Implications of Presence

However, along with the calls for more presence, Listening Teams heard concerns about the costs versus the benefits of more outsiders being present. People in Sri Lanka, Kosovo, Kenya, Thailand, Cambodia and many other places were concerned about the large amounts of funds spent on overhead costs versus resources allocated to beneficiaries. A provincial government official in Sri Lanka made this recommendation to international agencies, “Lessen your own costs. You can’t ignore the fact that initial set up is expensive, but once in place, streamline your processes. Use already established ‘in country’ experts who understand the local context. International experts won’t always be experts in Sri Lanka and they are expensive.” A Cambodian aid worker commented that “The members of the international aid community are spending too much money on themselves, their privileged way of life, high salaries and fancy equipment like vehicles, while people working here don’t have enough to eat. There is too much overhead, and waste....often the aid is for decoration.”

Similarly, in Bosnia and Kosovo, a number of people were upset that donors channeled much of the donated money back to their countries by paying their own consultants and staff despite the presence of qualified local people. Some noted that “One expatriate expert costs more than an entire department of local staff. Money could have been used to increase local institutions’ salaries so that they have more qualified people there.” A student in Ecuador said, “We know of projects in which the foreign technicians receive salaries that are so high, that this amount of money could pay the salaries of three local technicians who could do the same work and maybe even better, because they know the communities and are part of this culture.”

Possible Implications

Presence matters to local people as one aspect of having a relationship. Closeness and repeated interactions are an essential aspect of collegiality and exchange among equals. People in recipient societies recognize this. You cannot build a relationship if you are not there.

People are telling us that absence signals distance and distance does not create a respectful relationship. At the same time, people appreciate increasing reliance by international agencies on local capacities as demonstrated by working with local partner organizations and hiring more local people as staff. Finding the way to be present in many local situations in ways that build relationships and gather real information about local circumstances and, at the same time, working with local individuals and agencies to reinforce their capacities, is a challenge for international aid agencies.

Questions for Further Exploration:

- What specific problems would an increased field presence address? And how?
- Is presence really the answer to these problems? What are the alternatives to presence? Can we address these issues and show concern through other means than increasing presence?
- How can international agencies and donors increase their presence (or relationships/colleagueship) while avoiding the potential backlash around re-instituting neo-colonial relationships and being mindful of inherent power dynamics?