

## Notes

- 1 URD stands for Urgence, réhabilitation, développement.
- 2 DFID, 2005.
- 3 OCHA, 2007.
- 4 SMART, 2007.
- 5 Darcy, 2003.
- 6 Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2007a.
- 7 Werly, 2005.
- 8 Acronym for "Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats."
- 9 Groupe URD, 2002.
- 10 CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2007.
- 11 Chambers, 1992.
- 12 World Food Programme, 2007.
- 13 SMART, 2007.
- 14 ECHO, 2008.
- 15 Groupe URD, 2006.

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## CHAPTER 6

## The Giving-Receiving Relationship: Inherently Unequal?

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### Introduction

The humanitarian assistance community struggles with what we perceive to be an inherently unequal relationship between givers and receivers of help. We *intend* to treat people with dignity and respect in order to signal our equality. However, at some basic level, many humanitarian actors believe that the reality of their plenty alongside the reality of others' needs establishes such a fundamental human dichotomy that inequality is inevitable. Given this perception, humanitarian assistance workers are seeking better approaches, in order to redress what they see as the inherent inequality between giver and receiver.

Some of these approaches are conceptual, based on what kind of relationships humanitarians would like to establish with recipients of assistance. Others are practical, having to do with programming techniques and modalities. Working *with*, rather than *for*, ensuring accountability to communities as well as to donors, and "involving beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response"<sup>1</sup> have all become common parlance among humanitarian actors as they attempt to address inequality between givers and receivers.

But one might ask: Do people within communities that receive aid also perceive an inherent and inevitable inequality? Do they, too, struggle to find ways to ameliorate or redress it? Or is it possible that the very expectation of inequality on the part of aid providers shapes and causes unequal relations which are neither inevitable nor inherent?

These are the questions that this paper will explore. We first look at how international humanitarian agencies think about the inequality dilemma and some of the steps they take to address it. Next, we turn to the voices and ideas of the people who live in recipient societies, collected through a systematic and compre-

hensive Listening Project which is described more fully below. We compare how recipients feel about inequality and its causes with the approaches of the aid providers. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for international assistance and how what we have learned could inform approaches that affirm, rather than undermine, essential human equality.

### The struggle of international humanitarian actors with inherent inequality

International humanitarian actors are concerned by the unequal status they enjoy relative to the people they seek to help. They have goods that others need. They have options that others do not have. They are usually safe and well fed when others are not. They can choose whether or not to respond to a crisis, whereas those who are struck by crisis have no choice. They can choose to leave (evacuate) if conditions become too difficult. Local people cannot leave or, if they do, face the uncertainty of being displaced persons or refugees. Humanitarians who are committed to saving lives and alleviating suffering start with many advantages relative to those whose lives are at risk and who are suffering. These advantages make many humanitarians uncomfortable, even as they form the basis for the humanitarian action.

One manifestation of this discomfort is the ongoing discussion among humanitarian workers of which terminology to use when referring to the people they help. Humanitarians rejected *victims* – although the media and some NGO fundraisers still find it apt when exciting public reactions to crises – because it was seen to reinforce the divide between helper and helpless. Some humanitarians use the term *beneficiaries* to make explicit their commitment to improving the lives of the people they assist.<sup>2</sup> Others prefer *recipients* as a simple and mod-

est descriptor of the people to whom they deliver services, letting the people who receive them be the judges of whether or not they benefit from these services. Recently, a number of NGOs have adopted business language, calling the people they serve *clients*, in order to affirm their right to assess what is offered in the same way that buyers of products evaluate and choose among optional market offerings.

The words chosen carry messages, intended to avoid being paternalistic or patronizing. Humanitarians want to signal respect and establish positive relationships through language, even as they – the holders of things that people in crisis need – deliver these things to needy people.

The search for proper terminology is paralleled by a search for appropriate ways to work with communities in need. *Participatory processes* and *partnerships* have become *de rigueur* in aid delivery. It is common for humanitarian NGOs to claim that they involve recipient communities in all aspects of programming. Increasingly, international agencies partner with local NGOs or hire local staff in order to show their respect for local culture, ideas, and capacities. By ceding decision-making and evaluation roles to people on the receiving side of the equation, humanitarians mean to signal and to actualize equality.

Humanitarians' choice of language and their efforts to involve local communities in all stages of programming are driven by pragmatic, as well as ideological, motives. Language choices and programming strategies are expected to both honor and reinforce the dignity of people who have suffered a calamity and to improve the effectiveness of programming by ensuring better understanding of local needs and more accurate targeting of assistance. These choices are expected to go some way toward redressing the inherent inequality in the relationships between givers and receivers.

### The Listening Project

Before turning to our discussion of how people in recipient societies of humanitarian efforts see this problem, we should first describe the source of the ideas that form the basis for this discussion.

One way to get answers to the questions this paper addresses is to ask the people who live in the societies where humanitarians ply their trade. Over the past two years, the Listening Project (LP) of CDA Collaborative Learning Projects<sup>3</sup> has been asking such questions of a wide range of people who live in countries where vari-

ous types of international assistance has been offered. The Listening Project (LP) has engaged many international and local NGOs in visiting communities and talking with people about how they, the local observers, feel about the processes and impact of international efforts to help in their societies. What have they observed? How do they judge the cumulative effects of aid processes? How do they *feel* about this assistance?

Through open-ended conversations, listening teams have heard, recorded, and reported the analyses, ideas, insights, and judgments of a broad range of people. Included are people who have directly received assistance, others who have been a part of the chain of assistance delivery (as, for example, by working with an international or local NGO), or people who occupy positions from which to observe the processes of aid, such as, for example, a business person in a town struck by the tsunami or a government official who sees international actors in his/her area. Across 13 countries where teams have listened to date,<sup>4</sup> where many different types of assistance have been provided, we have heard remarkable consistency and commonality of insights and judgments.<sup>5</sup> Even the areas of broad disagreement found in any one country are also found in most other countries. Where people have questions, their counterparts in other countries have the same questions. Where they have certainties, these too are mirrored elsewhere.

This paper will report the broad (and preliminary<sup>6</sup>) findings of what people are saying about how it feels to be on the receiving side of aid. Specifically, we will look at how they see the issue of inequality between givers and receivers. We will look at what they say, both about the messages of assistance delivery, and about the programming approaches of the humanitarian actors.

### How well are humanitarians doing?

How well do humanitarians signal respect for the dignity and capabilities of communities in need? How well do they ensure better targeting of delivery and fuller local ownership of outcomes? How well do they help people who need and want help? How well are they doing at overcoming inequality, at treating the people they help as equals?

### What people in recipient societies say about humanitarian assistance

#### The explicit message of assistance...

People consistently express their deep appreciation for the broad and intended message of international humanitarian assistance. "We did not expect anyone to help us. When these people arrived, we were amazed." "They did not have to come here and they came." "You saved our lives. Without your help, we would be dead by now."<sup>7</sup>

People tell us that the generosity and risk-taking of humanitarian action is impressive. They recognize it, welcome it, and are grateful for it.

Interestingly, in thousands of Listening Project conversations, we have not heard anyone worry about the terminology humanitarians use to describe the – beneficiaries, recipients, or clients of assistance! People understand and accept the impulse to help people in need as a natural impulse. Perhaps because today's aid recipients feel that, if they were in a position to help others who suffered from a calamity, they would do so, they do not interpret the act of giving as an indication of inequality.

It is worth noting that in some societies where international aid actors arrive, the traditions of giving represent strikingly different relations from those assumed by Western aid providers. For example, in Buddhist societies, the giver of alms to monks is the supplicant, asking for the privilege of giving to someone who is seen as more holy. The essential difference in such circumstances from those of crisis is, of course, that monks (and other ascetics) voluntarily adopt poverty, whereas crisis survivors – yet another term chosen to signal respect – do not. Nonetheless, an assumption of superiority of giver to receiver may not always be accurate.

Listening Project conversations show that there is broad and basic human identity with acts of generosity. Many people who receive assistance see this generosity as affirming, rather than belittling.

This is the good news. There is also bad news.

#### The implicit messages of assistance and how it is provided

The translation of the idea of generosity into programmes, however, is *not* affirming, according to many of the voices heard through the LP. The processes and structures by which assistance is delivered soon erode the affirming message of humanitarianism. The same people who express appreciation for life-saving help

also describe how the programming processes leave them disappointed, discouraged, disempowered, and resentful. Most conversations have begun with expressions of appreciation, but move quickly to negative analysis. People say, "You saved our lives, but..." or "International help is good, but..." The "buts" they go on to discuss are both explicit and instructive.

According to many people living in societies on the receiving end of assistance, inequality between aid provider and aid receiver is *not* inherent. It is a product of conscious and intentional choices and approaches of providers. What begins as an affirming generosity becomes a system of externally-driven delivery of things and services to people who are, over time, weakened not only by the crisis they have experienced but also by the assistance they receive.<sup>8</sup> What many see as having represented a relationship of humane equality becomes a systematic reinforcement of inequality as a result of policies and practices of the humanitarian assistance actors.

Below we outline four categories of explicit, instructive critique that the Listening Project has heard again and again, in place after place where humanitarian assistance has been offered.

#### Pre-packaged programming/donor agendas

People resent aid packages that are pre-determined and inappropriate. They say:

"NGOs are inflexible in the types of assistance (they provide)...it is top-driven and is simply channeled down to us."<sup>9</sup>

"Some international NGOs come with their own agendas and are driven and influenced by the priorities set by their donors."<sup>10</sup>

One Listening Team summarized what they had heard. "There are common complaints that NGOs take a blanket approach and arrive with pre-planned programs..."<sup>11</sup> Another concluded, "NGOs are often bound by rigid proposal submission deadlines set by donors and this hinders their ability to consult communities."<sup>12</sup>

Even people who live in very remote areas are remarkably savvy about international forces and how these play out in the aid they do, or do not, receive. Many complain about how "the donor agenda" sets the terms for decisions and outcomes that occur in their towns and villages, without regard for the real situations in those locations.

Zimbabwe provided an interesting example of this. Many people there talked about how the international community's disapproval of Zimbabwe's governance has meant that all assistance comes as emergency rather than

development aid. As a result, they say, they receive no help that is focused on longer-term, systemic issues that badly need to be addressed. Further, they report that the international focus on HIV/AIDS has so proscribed the targeting of many aid efforts that they go exclusively to those affected by HIV/AIDS.

The grandparents of four orphaned grandchildren said, “We don’t understand the beneficiary selection process ... Yesterday, an NGO distributed blankets but only our HIV+ granddaughter got one. What about her siblings, they are orphans too!”<sup>13</sup>

Another person asked, “Did donors think that only children living with HIV/AIDS would eat the donated food when others in the family are also hungry?”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in Kosovo, people describe the negative and inappropriate impact of “the donor agenda.” They note how the shift in funding focus from helping Kosovar Albanians just after the NATO bombing to supporting the return of Kosovar Serbs (to achieve the international objective of a multi-ethnic society) increased inter-group animosity. They resent the imposition of others’ standards on their crisis.

One person said, “...we went to talk to [an international] agency. We asked them to help poor families that were not displaced but we were told that this was not possible. We said, ‘Well what do we have to do to get assistance, leave Kosovo and come back again?’”<sup>15</sup>

People in Kosovo also talked about their reactions to the international targeting of multi-ethnic communities, often to the neglect of mono-ethnic ones.

One person said, “To get aid, not only does your community have to have many ethnic groups, they have to have problems with each other too!”<sup>16</sup>

In another community, people explained that they had received a school, a health clinic, and an electrical grid in their village: “We got all this aid because the village was ‘multi-ethnic.’ The NGOs were fulfilling their own conditions. We heard this on TV.”<sup>17</sup>

These comments are common. In many places people describe the negative consequences of the labeling that goes with external ideas about who should get assistance. When external donors decide that IDPs are “most needy,” others who may have suffered equally have no access to help. When contributions are raised to serve “tsunami victims,” people who are homeless because of fighting do not qualify for support. Hearing this from many local people, a number of whom have themselves been recipients of assistance, challenges the humanitarian system’s commitment to provide aid “solely on the basis of need.”<sup>18</sup>

What we are hearing is that beneficiary criteria established by humanitarian actors often do not match the circumstances where assistance is delivered. When what appears to be the greatest need from outside is not the appropriate circumstantial criterion, people on the recipient end of aid are disturbed not only by the inappropriateness of delivery and its inefficiencies but also by the disrespect that such determinations from outside communicate.

LP has heard no one in a recipient country worry about whether they are called a *beneficiary* or a *client*. We have heard many people express their anger at the arrogance of outsiders who predetermine need in categories that they feel are biased and inappropriate in their society, or apply programming approaches developed in quite different societies. Some used the word “insulted” to describe how they felt when NGOs brought pre-packaged assistance.

Resentment is increased when people are urged to “participate” in programme planning and design, but they soon see that choices and decisions have already been made – outside. The power they are asked to exercise and the options that are open to them are prescribed and proscribed by aid donors and headquarters miles from their realities. When pre-determined limits or approaches are driven by geo-political considerations unrelated to people’s real needs and/or ideas, external dominance of internal efficacy is even stronger.

### Speed

Humanitarians often say that the necessity of working rapidly to meet dire need does not allow time for interacting with and developing the participation of local communities. Many people in recipient societies also recognize that some things need to be done quickly to save lives. Some say that “the best thing” about NGOs is that they can act more quickly than governments.

However, with broad consistency, people who have suffered crises told the Listening Project that the emphasis on speed has multiple negative consequences. A focus on speed, they say, overrides attention to learning about local realities that would allow providers to do good programming. Without such knowledge, many say, outsiders make numerous mistakes that cannot be compensated for by speediness. Some note that crises are brief (“three months”) and that humanitarian agencies regularly provide assistance for some time beyond this. They say:

“Calm down and visit and get to know the people. Don’t run in with your own agenda.”<sup>19</sup>

“People come from the outside and do not spend time to get to know the community and the area. They see what is on the surface and they only see problems.”<sup>20</sup>

“In the rush to get things done, too often the intended beneficiaries and potential local partners are left out of the discussions, and thus money gets wasted.”<sup>21</sup>

“They do not spend enough time to select the right beneficiaries and rely too much on the...leaders to choose beneficiaries.”<sup>22</sup>

Criticisms of speed came up, primarily, in LP conversations with people who had suffered rapid and extensive emergencies. These remarks were related to humanitarian assistance, not to development assistance. This finding has surprised some humanitarians who equate efficiency with the response speed of international aid. When we hear from survivors a reasonably argued plea to slow down and take time before delivering or acting, our notions about timeliness – and about our definition of efficiency – are challenged.

We hear people resenting the disrespect for their ideas, abilities, and concerns that they see coming from hurried work. They see mistakes being made which could have been prevented with just a little more time spent in getting to know local realities. They say that, when internationals think that speed matters most, they are “arrogant” and “bossy.” They see the single-minded focus on speed as a programming choice that reinforces external dominance over internal concerns and circumstances and, that also produces waste and misdirection.

### Presence

Closely linked to the criticisms of speed are communities’ comments about the physical absence of donors and international staff. Many people tell us that they want to see more of international aid providers, they want more direct contact. They want to talk to and with international humanitarians.

“Aid workers should live with us, see how we are living.”<sup>23</sup>

“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.”<sup>24</sup>

“They arrive; they help us; they leave. And we never hear from them again. So, what did we do wrong?”<sup>25</sup>

“NGOs always come and ask, but only from the headman... You should get your information directly from us. Sub-district office people babysit people in the village. I understand that your staff needs to talk to district people, but they are not our parents. We can make decisions for ourselves.”<sup>26</sup>

People have several reasons for wanting more international presence. First, they want the respect that direct contact implies and reinforces. They want to be *known* by the people who come to work with them in crisis. 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.”<sup>27</sup>

Second, many feel that internationals are fairer than local political leaders who historically are enmeshed in systems of patronage. When internationals follow through on allocations 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, are nonetheless part of the local systems, and cannot operate outside of these norms.

Third, many people are incredulous that donors and international agencies would “give so much money” and not come back to see what happened.

“The donors just come and then leave. Wouldn’t it be good to find out whether the project was working or not?”<sup>28</sup>

“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.”<sup>29</sup>

Finally, people want closer contact with international agencies who work with them in order to be able to hold those agencies more directly accountable for outcomes. The Zimbabwe Listening team wrote, “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... 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.”<sup>30</sup>

Presence matters to local people as one aspect of relationship. How can humanitarians hope to communicate equality and respect from a distance? Closeness and repeated interactions are an essential aspect of colleague-ship and exchange among equals. People in recipient societies recognize this. When we remove ourselves from local circumstances either because we are “too busy” or

because the circumstances are “too dangerous,” we create the inequality that we seek to overcome.

### Participatory and partnering processes

The fourth category in which we hear many local people comment on the programmatic inequality they experience in humanitarian assistance is precisely the area that humanitarian actors rely on to correct the inequality of the relationship – namely, the participatory processes and partnership approaches that are now widely touted and used.

Overwhelmingly, people on the recipient end of assistance also laud participation. When they have it, they appreciate it. When they do not have it, they criticize its absence. In many LP conversations, people described effective participatory processes. What worked in one circumstances, however, did not always work in others. That is, local circumstances – which can only be known when we are sufficiently present in communities and when we take the time required to know them – determine what kind of participation is right. Common to all descriptions of “good participation,” however, were the links that people made to the outcomes humanitarians seek – greater local ownership of efforts, better targeting of assistance to those who really need it and who will benefit from it, greater connection to longer-term progress. It seems abundantly clear that getting participation right is important for humanitarian, as well as development, assistance.

However, people resent being asked to participate in decision-making when they observe that their ideas and opinions carry very little weight in determining what happens. They say:

“Participatory planning is just a phrase. Money and time are limited from the donor side and an agenda has already been set long before agencies go into communities.”<sup>31</sup>

“It seems as if NGOs need to empty their warehouses.”<sup>32</sup>

The Listening Team in Bolivia captured the content of many of the conversations when they wrote:

“We...heard a lot about the disappointment, frustration and even humiliation that people felt when NGOs refused to treat them in [a participatory] manner and opted for a more vertical, authoritarian, top-down approach. There were comments about NGOs promising or feigning a participatory approach but in fact acting in a fashion that was quite different. This included NGOs relying too much on local leaders (sometimes a single leader) who themselves did not consult widely

and openly and who dealt with others in an authoritarian manner.”<sup>33</sup>

The Zimbabwe Team’s report said “The evidence from all our conversations suggests that most recipient communities are not being significantly engaged in aid programming and decision-making.”<sup>34</sup>

In Bosnia, the team reported that “A few people said that international agencies claim to be partners with their beneficiaries or local organizations, but then behave as the owners/bosses. One local NGO representative talked about walking out of a presentation by an international organization; she found it so arrogantly and condescendingly presented that she could not bear to stay.”<sup>35</sup>

People want to and are ready to participate and be partners. But most say that the NGO approaches fall short of what they want. People describe meetings set up by NGOs for community participation, noting that these are often held at times that are inconvenient for many working people (because NGO staff must be back in their compounds before dark). Or meetings are dominated by people who know how to speak out, while others are excluded from real discussion. Many note that consultation with community “leaders” does not mean that anyone else in a community is involved in decisions. Some people say that NGO participatory processes are too time-consuming and partial. One Listening team noted that “Participating in select activities provides...little knowledge of the consequences and effects of...action and...little exposure to decision-making.”<sup>36</sup>

In other places, people told of what they hoped would be positive opportunities for participation turning sour. For example, in Aceh, people described their involvement in writing project proposals on behalf of their communities to receive assistance. NGOs had invited these proposals to encourage community participation in programme design. However, what most people did not understand was that only a fraction of the proposals would actually receive funding. Therefore, from the beginning, unbeknown to the “participants,” more proposals would be turned down than would be funded. A possibly valid participatory method went awry because of inadequate communication.

We discussed earlier the frustration and resentment people feel when they are encouraged to participate in planning and decisions, only to find out later that most things were decided by people outside the area. External agendas and pre-packaged assistance modalities consistently undermine claims to participation and belittle people’s inputs.

Participatory processes can affirm respect and mutuality between aid provider and aid receiver. False or badly executed processes can communicate disrespect and exacerbate feelings of external dominance over internal concerns.

### Implications for the future

From the four themes cited above – external agendas, too much concern with speed, lack of physical presence and failed participatory and partnership arrangements – it is clear that recipients of humanitarian assistance want more than handouts. Stressing their own insights and ideas, people want aid that involves contact, they want to interact with people whom they know to have useful skills and experience but they want to do it in ways that acknowledge their own knowledge and strengths as well. This kind of interaction would, it seems, affirm essential human equality. When it is missing, people feel belittled, used, and disrespected.

Good Humanitarian Donorship Principle 7 reads: *Request implementing humanitarian organizations to ensure, to the greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response.*

This is a weak principle. Why does it “request” rather than require that implementing organizations involve beneficiaries? Why does it introduce the possibility that it may not always be “possible” to involve them? How much involvement is “adequate” for affirmation of dignity and equality? How much is “adequate” for effective and efficient programming?

People on the receiving end of international humanitarian assistance see as essential their involvement from the beginning to the end of any assistance programme. They would involve themselves in appraisals and assessments, in discussions and decisions about operations and implementation, in close observation and monitoring of immediate and ongoing, expected and unexpected, impacts and, ultimately, in evaluating how well any effort has succeeded in saving lives, alleviating suffering and doing so in ways that respect and affirm the people who are helped.

All four areas of the critique offered above challenge the humanitarian assistance community. Where in the GHD Initiative do we hear the voices that are reflected here? If we want to be truly attentive to the thinking of those whom we intend to help, we will

need to rethink some of our basic premises and operational approaches.

For example, as government donors and international NGOs move increasingly toward coordination and coherence in order to assure policy and programmatic consistency, people in recipient societies tell of their resentment of international agendas as these play out in their societies. They seek variation in assistance, variation that takes into account *their* circumstances as these differ from those of other crises. They want assistance that is responsive to them and what *they* feel they need to address.

This does not mean that humanitarians must forget all that has been learned. On the contrary, people want the perspectives and experience that international actors bring. But, they want these to be balanced by a genuine respect for local realities and people’s own priorities and needs. Finding the right mix for respecting local variations and continuing to apply lessons learned in previous settings is a challenge for international humanitarian assistance.

As humanitarian agencies look increasingly to business to develop systems for the most efficient delivery of emergency supplies, people are telling humanitarians to slow down and take time to know them before sending things. They are saying that rapidity too often makes delivery, even delivery of needed goods, go wrong. Speed, they say, is the wrong criterion for success.

Again, as noted, local people know that some things need to be done quickly. They appreciate the fact that international agencies have less red-tape than local bureaucracies. Finding the balance between sufficient speed to address urgent needs and sufficient time to talk with, listen to, and engage with people to ensure that assistance honors their realities is, again, a direct challenge for the way international humanitarian assistance is currently provided.

As individuals donate to agencies that report the lowest overhead relative to delivery of supplies, people receiving assistance tell us that, rather than more goods, they want more presence, which adds to overheads. As government donors and aid agencies reduce travel budgets and limit their international staff in crisis settings, people are asking for more direct contact and more personal interaction. 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 local people as staff. “It will

be a challenge for humanitarian agencies to be present in many local situations in ways that build relationships and gather real information about local circumstances and, at the same time, work with local individuals and agencies to reinforce their capacities.”

As agencies attempt to establish good partnerships with local agencies and participatory methods that engage local communities, we nonetheless hear from many people that these approaches, at least as they are often now implemented, are perceived as fake and insincere. In each setting where Listening teams have talked with people from small villages to governmental offices, they have heard fascinating and sensible ideas for better ways for aid agencies to determine needs, target deliveries, organize community involvement and manage their funds. People have creative and wise ideas about how things might be done in their own communities for real and lasting improvements. They do not know, and do not claim to know, everything they need to know to improve their lives. They welcome external ideas and material assistance. But they also know that the basis for genuine change that will substantially improve their lives and life prospects is not demeaning handouts but, instead, a full and engaging face-to-face relationship with others who care and who are willing to come to them, work with (not for) them, and add what they know to what is locally known to solve immediate and longer term problems.

## Conclusion

We began this paper reflecting on the struggle of many dedicated humanitarians to address and overcome what they often see as an inevitable and inherent inequality between themselves and those they hope to help. From what we have heard through listening, however, it would seem that there is no inevitable and inherent inequality. Rather, it is systems and approaches that we create which perpetuate the lack of collegiality and respect that underpin equal relationships. The alternative is a real possibility. If we can find ways to listen to what we are told by people who live in the societies where we deliver humanitarian assistance, and hear what they tell us, we will have the opportunity to save lives and alleviate suffering without guilt about inequality. In fact, our ways of working will reinforce and affirm an essential equality where everyone contributes to the solutions to overwhelming problems.

## Notes

- 1 Quoted from Principle 7 from the *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship* endorsed in Stockholm, 17 June 2003.
- 2 The dictionary definition of “benefits” is “something that has a good effect or promotes well-being.” “Beneficiary”: The person who is helped by some action or process. Recipient of a process that is intended to make a person’s life better in some way, recipient of something that has a good effect or promotes well-being.
- 3 CDA Collaborative Learning Projects is a non-profit organization based on Cambridge, Massachusetts, formerly known as Collaborative for Development Actions. The Director of CDA’S Listening Project is Dayna Brown.
- 4 Aceh (Indonesia), Angola, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Thailand, US Gulf Coast, and Zimbabwe.
- 5 See [www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com) for more detail on the Listening Project.
- 6 The Listening Project will visit a total of at least 20 countries by the end of 2009 and will, in addition, conduct a series of feedback workshops in multiple locations to invite reflection and further analysis on the findings from the listening teams’ visits.
- 7 Examples of comments frequently heard by the Listening Project teams.
- 8 This finding is not new. One project in which I was deeply involved in the 1980s produced a book that traces the processes by which well-intentioned assistance undermines and weakens recipient societies. The book also traces the alternative, providing experience of how emergency assistance can in fact leave societies stronger and more resistant to subsequent crises. See Anderson and Woodrow, 1998.
- 9 Zimbabwe Listening Project Report, p.18.
- 10 Thailand Listening Project Report, p.37.
- 11 Zimbabwe Listening Project Report, p.20.
- 12 Ethiopia Listening Project Report, p.19.
- 13 Zimbabwe Listening Project Report, p.12.
- 14 Zimbabwe Listening Project Report, p.13.
- 15 Kosovo Listening Project Report, p.19.
- 16 Kosovo Listening Project Report, p.20.
- 17 Kosovo Listening Project Report, p.20.
- 18 As noted in the humanitarian principles of many agencies and endorsed in the Good Humanitarian Donorship *Principles* as well.
- 19 Thai Burma Border Notes, p.64.
- 20 Thailand Listening Project Report, p.35.
- 21 Conclusion drawn by a Listening team in Bosnia, Bosnia Listening Project Report, p.12.
- 22 Team comments in the Ethiopia Listening Project Report, p.13.
- 23 Ethiopia Listening Project Report, p.15.
- 24 Aceh Listening Project Report, p.14.
- 25 Bolivia Listening Project Report, p.5.
- 26 Thailand Listening Project Report, p.21.
- 27 Bolivia Listening Project Report, p.5.
- 28 Zimbabwe Listening Project Report, p.20.
- 29 Kosovo Listening Project Report, p.17.

- 30 Zimbabwe Listening Project Report, p.19.
- 31 Sri Lanka Listening Project Notes, p.23.
- 32 Aceh Listening Project Report, p.3.
- 33 Bolivia Listening Project Report, p.19.
- 34 Zimbabwe Listening Project Report, p.20.
- 35 Bosnia Listening Project Report, p.9.
- 36 Thailand Listening Project Report, p.5.

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