

**The Listening Project Issue Paper:
Perceptions of Aid in Places Affected by
Conflict**

June 2011

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 Issue Paper 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 or Issue Paper.

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 and this Issue Paper

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with colleagues in international and local organizations and donor agencies, started the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the experiences and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts. Those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, environmental conservation, human rights, and peace-building efforts can learn a great deal by listening to the experiences, analyses and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such international efforts.

From late 2005 through 2009, the Listening Project listened to nearly 6,000 people through 20 *Listening Exercises* organized in a variety of places, including: Aceh (Indonesia), Afghanistan, Angola, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, East Timor, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kosovo, Lebanon, Mali, Mindanao (Philippines), Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Thai-Burma border area, Zimbabwe, and an exploratory visit to the US Gulf Coast. Reports from each of these field visits are available on the CDA website.¹

The Listening Teams were made up of staff from international and local NGOs (and in some places, bilateral donor representatives), with facilitators from CDA. The teams did not work from pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, they explained to people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, they were interested to hear how local people experienced and perceived these efforts. Most conversations were with one or two individuals, though in some cases small group discussions were held. Conversations were generally not pre-arranged, except for appointments with government officials, academics and others who required advance notice.

In every place, Listening Teams talked both to people who had and had not directly received international assistance, to some who were involved in the delivery of assistance, as well as with those who were close enough to observe the effects of outside assistance. In every country, Teams listened to community members, government officials, community-based and civil society organizations, religious leaders, teachers, business people, health workers, farmers, traders, and many others. In every location, teams heard from people who represented different ethnicities, religions, genders, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds.

These *Issue Papers* highlight the evidence gathered on a common theme and/or cross-cutting issue which has been heard across these various contexts. The papers are intended to stimulate discussion, feedback and reflection by practitioners and policy-makers and we welcome your thoughts. The Listening Project will incorporate the feedback and suggestions in the final publication, which will highlight local people's experiences with aid efforts and their suggestions for improving the effectiveness of international assistance.

¹ Listening Project, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects,
http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project_profile.php?pid=LISTEN&pname=Listening%20Project

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON AID IN PLACES AFFECTED BY CONFLICT

In the last two decades, a growing number of donors and operational aid agencies have committed to provide aid in a conflict sensitive way and to **do no harm**². Many aid providers strive to be conflict sensitive in all aspects of programming—from context analysis to implementation to evaluation—and some consider how humanitarian and development assistance can be used to promote broader peacebuilding and conflict prevention goals. Conflict sensitivity principles have been enshrined in agency-wide policies and several overarching multi-donor declarations and principles statements.³ On the ground, however, the effects of these commitments remain inconsistent, in some places indiscernible, and much remains to be done to improve international assistance efforts so that they do not have negative impacts on local conflicts, but rather strengthen local capacities for peace.

This *Issue Paper* highlights the perspectives of people in several aid recipient countries that have experienced inter-group and communal divisions and violence, and in some cases wars. We heard positive examples of assistance provided in ways that has reduced divisions and strengthened communal bonds. Yet many people also raised concerns about how aid interventions had exacerbated existing tensions or created new ones. Among the different issues surrounding the conflict (in)sensitivity of international aid efforts, we highlight the two most prevalent themes: 1) concerns about the politicization of aid and the harmful effects of external agendas, and 2) policy and programming decisions that determine where, when, how and to whom assistance is provided, which can have significant impacts on local tensions and conflicts.

While this was not one of the most common or high priority issues people talked about in all of the locations visited by the Listening Project, we draw attention to this issue because on-going discussions about aid effectiveness in fragile and conflict-affected countries ought to take into account the voices of people who have experienced the effects of external assistance in a conflict setting.

Aid and External Agendas

Prioritizing Stability and Security

In several places—including Afghanistan, Lebanon, Ecuador, Kenya, Kosovo, Mindanao (Philippines) and Sri Lanka—people raised questions about the motivations behind external assistance and the narrow objectives set by foreign donors who focus their efforts primarily on achieving stability in fragile and insecure areas. Many people, ranging from village residents and local aid workers, to provincial and national government officials, voiced concerns about the distortions arising from aid firmly linked to external and domestic security and statebuilding agendas.

For instance, in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province, people felt that their province is in a “shadow” as more money has been provided to areas affected by violence. Similarly, in Bamiyan province, a

² The *Do No Harm Project* was the first collaborative learning effort organized by CDA, the home of the Listening Project. For more information on the concept, principles, lessons and tools developed for conflict sensitive programming, see the *Do No Harm* materials on the CDA website at www.cdainc.com/dnh

³ For instance, see the OECD-DAC Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/45/38368714.pdf> and the work of the International Network on Conflict and Fragility which aims to improve international engagement in the world's 40+ fragile and conflict-affected states. www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/sps.

consistent refrain was that their province received scant assistance, because it had, “neither Taliban nor poppies.” An Afghan government official in Kabul complained, “The donors have different agendas and these are directed from their own headquarters. They are listening less to the Afghan government. The case with the PRTs is worse, where each PRT is different and is guided by military objectives without following the Provincial Development Strategies.”

In Ecuador, people suggested that assistance provided on the border with Colombia does not aim to support development of the area, but rather to mitigate an armed conflict and maintain an official government position. Residents in border villages noted with irony that there is a better standard of living on the Colombian side of the border where conflict is still ongoing. As one person pointed out, “[Ecuador] is a country that lives in peace. On the other side of the border they live in war, but the lives of the people who live on the other side are much better than the lives of those of us who are on this side. This is so, keeping in mind that on the other side, the guerrilla conflict does not allow the presence of external aid.”

In Mindanao, community members voiced their frustration with donors’ focus on places affected by conflict saying that, “It appears there is a need to be in war situation before we can get assistance,” and, “We have to risk our lives in order to get development aid.” Consequently, many people observed that the external agenda on security and prioritization of those affected by conflict often created perverse incentives and reinforced negative behaviors. Similarly, a Palestinian NGO director in Lebanon asserted that, “Where there is war there is assistance. During war most of the people’s needs are met. The international community helps to create a war zone. If we are bleeding, money is thrown at us, so it encourages people to make war.” In Kosovo where donors targeted multi-ethnic communities, often to the neglect of mono-ethnic ones, people also talked about perverse incentives created by external agendas saying, “To get aid, not only does your community have to have many ethnic groups, they have to have problems with each other too!”

Politicization of Aid by Domestic Actors

Many people (not just in places affected by conflict) questioned why donors seem to be insensitive to the ways their assistance has been used to further the partisan political aims of those in power. People traced the effects of external aid channeled through national and local governments and discussed ways external aid has fueled local political or sectarian divisions and agendas. For instance in Lebanon, where political and sectarian-based divides are deeply embedded in the country’s social fabric and institutions, people described an “aid as politics” phenomenon. A Member of Parliament in Beirut asserted that, “The opposition is disadvantaged by the Lebanese government’s aid allocation. If you leave resource allocation up to the Lebanese government, everything is politicized, everything is politically driven, and everything is communal.” Local people acknowledged that the long-standing sectarian structures serve as gateways to assistance, with few alternatives to the existing system of patronage. As a village elder in south Lebanon put it, “If you have a leader from your religious sect in the government, he will bring you aid. If not, nobody will take care for you.”

In Bosnia, many people expressed disappointment about the post-conflict political system established

“In the course of the war in 2006, international assistance came from the UN to be distributed to the people suffering from the war. However, the help could not go to 60% of villages in the South, it was forbidden because Hezbollah controls these villages. This is like you are blinding yourself! You alienate a portion of the community. There is a careless approach to conflict and it is harmful.”

A Lebanese NGO Director

by the international community. They felt it was dysfunctional and represented “the same war politics,” and that the politicians only helped their own constituencies. Similarly, Kosovars saw the post-conflict political space captured by short-term interests, with one person asserting that, “Democratization was a false assumption--they have not created a system that people can use. Parties chose who will benefit them, not the people. There is a war between the political parties which is reflected in the population.”

People in several places talked about how political influence over who benefits from aid efforts is a form of corruption that is hard for them to challenge and that this can create or exacerbate tensions and suspicions. In Mindanao, a Muslim youth leader explained, “There is conflict between recipients and non-recipients when the politician decides to give some of the handouts to their friends or family even if they aren’t qualified to receive it. That’s when people who are supposed to receive feel badly towards those who do actually receive the aid, but they feel powerless to do anything about it.”

“Policy-makers are blocking assistance so they can keep us poor and then deliver assistance or promise it so that they can get our votes. Even now, Members of Parliament are campaigning and promising they will bring us water; they give some small handouts to get our votes and never deliver.”

A community member in Eastern Kenya prior to the post-election violence in 2007

How Providing Aid in Insecure Areas can Put People at Risk

People in situations of on-going conflict described how the provision of humanitarian assistance in insecure areas had sometimes placed the intended beneficiaries and aid workers at risk. In Mindanao (as in other places), aid workers face serious challenges during assessment and monitoring visits to field sites located in insecure areas. By contrast, some local communities perceive aid workers’ reluctance to visit field sites as a sign of selective aid interventions. People in North Cotabato and Lanao regions voiced concerns that “only accessible places are given aid” and worried that when aid agencies are required to report to the military “in order to help improve security” this increases mistrust and fear for the population already made vulnerable by conflict. In Burma/Myanmar where aid agencies operate in a highly militarized and polarized context, people described similar effects from the restrictions placed on NGO access to certain areas due to insecurity, poor roads, and due to pressure from the military regime.

In Sri Lanka, the war between government forces and the LTTE left many civilians caught in the middle. Aid agencies struggled with issues of trust, access and increasing demands to share information with the military structures. One resident of Batticaloa region accused aid agencies of looking the other way as civilians came under attack, saying “Just look at the recent war in Vakarai. When the [international agency] officers had access to the area and they were very well informed about the situation there, they never attempted to rescue the public. [An international agency] has access to many places and they ignored the people caught in the crossfire. The people were even starving without food and water. They were only concerned about the lives of their own staff. So they feared to go there.”

In Afghanistan, people saw the military’s role in aid delivery as harmful in many ways, including putting beneficiaries at risk. One Kabul resident described the sense of insecurity saying that, “People are afraid of the [Afghan] commanders. They don’t put their names on the list to receive aid because they don’t want to be targeted by the commanders.” An IDP in Kabul added, “If we keep our beards long, we’re called Al Qaeda, if we keep our beards short, Taliban say we’re international. We pray to our god, we don’t need aid, we don’t want to be killed.”

Programming Decisions and their Effects on Local Conflict Dynamics

The challenges of aid effectiveness in conflict affected and fragile states are recognized in a number of ongoing policy and donor level discussions and documents. Similarly, at the operational level, many agencies are striving to be more conflict-sensitive. People describe a myriad of programmatic decisions that positively or negatively influence inter-communal and intra-communal relations. The sections below summarize some of these program-level and project-level choices and their effects.

The Importance of Context Analysis

One overarching issue raised across all locations was that donors and implementers do not spend enough time and effort to understand the local context, particularly the local conflict dynamics and the needs of different conflict-affected communities. Local people say they believe this is because the donors and aid agencies are under pressure to be seen to be responding and spending money in a hurry. A city official in Mindanao said, “Those donors who have been on the ground longer understand the local dynamics and political context better. But people get moved around like ambassadors and that knowledge often goes with them. For example, people rarely ask, ‘Where is the source of authority and credibility within this community?’ before they enter one. In some places, it does not reside with the local government, but rather perhaps in the local rebel group or community leader. Knowing local context is important in order to bring even more change through a development process. But this takes time.”

“Programs can also cause tensions with surrounding communities. There needs to be a reduction in programs for IDPs. They cannot stop, but they need to be reduced a bit... Perhaps, if it can be done, programs need to be in all neighborhoods.” *A middle-aged man in an IDP camp in Dili District, East Timor*

Listening team members in Mindanao discussed how their organizations apply the *Do No Harm* framework to analyze the local context and the implications of aid interventions and to identify which existing community capacities they can support without fracturing the social fabric. A local development worker in Mindanao observed that, “There are several types of implementing approaches used by organizations working here in Mindanao. Some are very conscious of the conflict and aware of conflict sensitive programming principles, such as *Do No Harm*. The others provide technical assistance and projects implemented by contractors who build physical infrastructure such as schools, clinics. The latter ones often do not practice a consultative approach and de-emphasize ownership and sometimes this leads to tensions.”

On Targeting IDPs, Refugees and Returnees

In protracted displacement settings, the targeting of assistance for those who have fled or left during the conflict can profoundly affect the relationships between internally displaced people (IDPs), refugees and local (host) communities. For instance, in the Puttalam region of Sri Lanka, the bulk of international assistance supported IDPs, although the region is among the poorest in the country. One Muslim cleric explained that, “Initially the local community helped IDPs. Later when only IDPs started to get assistance, only their life started to change for the better. Local communities were neglected, left out and are now hurt and angry.” Another person added, “They come with nothing. Then within a year or two they have money, land and even build houses. And they still receive rations. We don’t get anything even though we are still poor.” A school built for IDP children had caused a great amount of tensions in one local community, with many people frustrated, saying “We made room for IDPs, but we were trampled by INGOs” and “While things look peaceful, trouble is brewing between IDPs and locals, both of whom are Muslims!” Several IDPs also raised concerns about these tensions and pointed out the

need for international assistance to address poverty amongst the host communities as well.

In northeastern Kenya, the local communities around Lockichoggio and the Kakuma refugee camp have been profoundly affected by the large and long-lasting presence of refugees and aid agencies. The local Turkana people and the Dinka people of South Sudan have historically been in conflict with each other. Since the Dinka received far more international assistance due to their refugee status, people suggested that the aid agencies may have reinforced age-old tensions. Two Turkana men from a village near the camp said they are just as poor and have similar needs as the refugees and suggested that, “If they are giving food rations for refugees they should give it here – for humanity. We are suffering here and people are eating around us. They have come to our country. We have given these people our land. What are we seeing? Nothing.”

In Mindanao (Philippines), people were concerned that communities experiencing relative peace, but struggling with poverty or aftershocks of conflict are in fierce competition for aid resources with internally displaced people (IDPs). However, in communities surrounding the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, the residents of surrounding villages described aid efforts that acknowledged their needs as well. They expressed genuine empathy towards the refugees and an appreciation for the services provided by NGOs in the camps, some of which allowed nearby villagers to get free medical assistance and even some schooling.

In post-conflict Bosnia (as in many other places), a large amount of international assistance focused on helping IDPs and refugees to return home, however this often created tensions between those who had fled and those who were categorized as “domiciles.” Some people felt that the international community reinforced ethnic differences by focusing so much on “returnees” since often people from only one ethnic group had been pushed out or had fled in different locales. But others thought this was an appropriate strategy since many returnees had lost their homes and needed more help than those who had stayed during the war. Similarly in Angola, a frustrated farmer said, “When the war came, many people went to Zambia and other places, but we stayed here the whole time. Today, those who fled receive aid, but we who spent the war years here are without any assistance at all.”

On Targeting of ex-combatants

In several places, people pointed out that in a post-war context, receiving certain kinds of assistance can easily identify recipients as ex-combatants from one side or the other in a civil war and create more tensions. In Angola, some ex-combatants who were trying to hide their former military affiliation said that being targeted for specific assistance as ex-combatants had “outed” them. Describing a project in which ex-soldiers received seeds and agricultural supplies, while other villagers did not, an Angolan farmer said, “When ex-combatants receive aid and the community does not, it causes conflict.” In some cases, the overt distribution of aid to ex-combatants resulted in entire villages targeted for retribution or discrimination. As a provincial government official in Angola observed, “Sometimes they [aid agencies] think they are helping all the people, but sometimes they are destroying the relationships between people.”

“No matter how much of a gang member a youth may be, he is a person who wants to move forward in his life. This is why I do not understand why the people that help continue to call us gang members. A gang member is helped in order that he stops being a gang member, but then he receives no help if he’s not a gang member.”

Former gang member in Ecuador

On Using Pre-determined Selection Criteria

People described targeting and beneficiary selection criteria as key programming decisions that can contribute to increased tensions between and within communities. For instance, residents in a remote Afghan village in Badakhshan Province said, “When organizations come they distribute aid to some villages and communities but not others. This has created many tensions and people wonder why they were not selected for the distribution of resources.” In Lebanon, a representative from the Ministry of Social Affairs called into question pre-determined vulnerability criteria, saying, “Sometimes aid targets certain groups, like women or handicapped. But sometimes the handicapped person does not need the aid; there is a poor person who does. This can cause problems with the community.”

On the Distribution of Assistance

People in many different contexts described how the arrival of external assistance had fueled competition, jealousies, selfishness, corruption, and preferential treatment. In Ethiopia, local district officials commented that the beneficiary selection process had created communal tensions on several levels: 1) between district officials selecting the beneficiaries and the community leaders; 2) between individuals targeted and those that are not; and 3) between communities targeted and those that are not. In Zimbabwe, a village chief explained, “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.”

“In the communities, because of NGO work, people are divided. Many committees for different projects of different organizations are formed, and people are divided according to who belongs to which organization....”

Two NGO staff from Kayin State, Myanmar

In Thailand, a Buddhist monk argued that post-tsunami assistance offered by different actors caused competition, divisions and “removal of the community spirit,” because family members and neighbors were working with different “projects” and getting varied benefits. In a nearby village, a community representative also complained about the low level of community participation in the village steering committee set up by NGOs who rebuilt their houses: “Nobody wants to be on it because of all these tensions around distribution and jealousies. There are lots of negative feelings... new people in the community; there is no more communal spirit, and very empty hearts.”

In several places, people described how mistrust and feelings of injustice could fuel violence. In Sri Lanka, a tsunami survivor in Galle said in reference to other tsunami aid recipients who received more aid: “I feel like taking a hard rock and hitting them.” In Angola, aid recipients described how residents from other communities that were not eligible for assistance robbed the recipients’ houses and routinely seized the aid.

On Differences in Community Contributions

In a number of places, people described how different approaches to community contributions to projects often caused confusion and tensions in local communities. For instance, in Burma/Myanmar, the different NGO requirements and valuation of community contributions has led to some confusion, and sometimes conflict, in communities. People explained that each community has its own cultural practices with respect to what individuals are expected to do for others (i.e. collaboration, local contribution, donation, voluntary spirit), and that some assistance seemed to make people less community-minded, more individualistic, and less likely to help each other. This was particularly true of assistance that paid or compensated those who participated in aid efforts. In Cambodia, a local environmental worker pointed out that “Paying people [to volunteer] is controversial, and it can cause

conflict and jealousies.” An advisor to the Timorese government noted that this practice created tensions and suggested, “The two dollars a day projects (for day labor on village projects) can continue, but they must be integrated with other projects. It’s not bad, but it shouldn’t make people lazy!”

On Spending Money Quickly

One of the biggest challenges people talked about in a number of places affected by conflicts and disasters was the urgency to spend funds quickly—and the harm that this often causes. A local staff member of an international organization in Afghanistan explained, “There are foreign interests and agendas. The donors are not caring about the same indicators as locals. They only care about burn rate. Donors don’t fund for impact.” In Sri Lanka, the head of a local NGO acknowledged that, “We all knew the good development principles like participation or conflict sensitivity, but in the rush of post-disaster relief, very few were able to uphold such principles because of requirements to spend money fast.”

Conclusion and questions for further exploration:

Recipients and observers of international assistance efforts point out that there are multiple factors that need to be considered by aid providers when planning and implementing short-term and long-term aid interventions. Even though many people described instances in which aid has exacerbated conflict in their communities and societies, most people did not call for a complete halt or withdrawal of assistance. Such an action could have its own harmful effects in societies already bearing the burden of conflict, humanitarian crisis and deep poverty. While people on the receiving end of international assistance are grateful for the solidarity and support, they unequivocally call for aid providers to conduct better context analysis, to put into practice inclusive listening and consultation processes with a wider range of actors, to recognize the unintended effects of their assistance and to make necessary changes in their policy and programming decisions so that they do not exacerbate existing conflicts.

The themes and issues summarized above shed light on a portion of a much bigger debate on aid effectiveness in fragile and conflict affected situations. People’s experiences and perceptions of the way aid impacts local conflicts are important pieces of evidence to be weighed in this ongoing debate given the growing focus by donors and implementing agencies on aid effectiveness and accountability to beneficiaries. It is clear that most people recognize that international assistance does not create conflicts, but it does have effects and can influence whether they worsen or abate. There are currently no accountability measures that effectively address or redress the negative impacts of international aid interventions on social cohesion and communal relations in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies. Development of such measures would signal a genuine commitment to conflict sensitive aid.