

# **The Listening Project Issue Paper:**

## **The Role of Staffing Decisions**

*June 2010*

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 NGOs and donor 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 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 more than 4,000 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.

The Listening Teams were made up of staff from international and local NGOs (and in some places, 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 perceived these efforts. Most conversations were with one or two individuals, though in some cases small group discussions were held. Conversations were 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 or who had been involved in the delivery of assistance, as well as with people who had not directly benefitted or been involved, but who were close enough to observe the effects of outside assistance. 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* present a number of the common and cross-cutting issues and themes which have been heard across these various contexts and are intended to stimulate discussion, feedback and reflection by practitioners and policy-makers. The Listening Project will incorporate the feedback and suggestions in the final publication, which will highlight the concerns and suggestions that people have for improving the effectiveness of international assistance efforts.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the involvement and significant contributions of the participating agencies, and the willingness of people to talk to the Listening Teams. The Listening Project truly appreciates all who have contributed their time, resources and effort to this initiative.

Across the countries, communities and various contexts visited by Listening Teams, people talked about how the staff of international and local aid agencies shape their experiences with international assistance efforts. People described how hiring decisions, salaries, spending priorities, relationships and responsibilities of staff can influence local perceptions of aid organizations and their effectiveness. People frequently talked about how the local staff's ethnic, political, and other affiliations can affect who has access to assistance and how it is delivered. Some also raised issues around hiring international staff and consultants versus local personnel. People consistently voiced concerns about local and international staff members' local contextual knowledge, cultural sensitivity and impartiality, and how aid agencies can support or undermine local capacity and sustainability through their hiring decisions.

### **Why Knowing the Context and Communities is Important**

One of the most prevalent concerns people raised during the Listening Exercises was the importance of donors and aid agency staff understanding the contexts and communities in which they work. People described the importance of local knowledge in designing appropriate and relevant projects, communicating effectively, and ensuring staff impartiality.

#### Local Knowledge

Whether speaking of international or local staff, understanding of the specific culture and local community was highly valued by people in recipient societies, and was seen to be an essential element in designing and implementing effective aid efforts. While people appreciated “those staff that got out from behind their computers and followed up on the realities on the ground,” international staff members were often criticized for not spending time in the field getting to know the people they were aiming to assist and the contexts in which they live.

Many of those to whom we listened suggested that international staff often do not have enough local knowledge at the onset of projects and do not have the desire to learn or stay long enough to gain it. Lack of confidence in international staff's local understanding was especially strong in the case of technicians or consultants hired for short-term projects.

When people spoke of the benefits of hiring local staff for their cultural and contextual knowledge, people made an important distinction between local hires from within the beneficiary community or region and national hires from elsewhere in the country. To Chimborazo villagers in Ecuador, for example, “A technician or NGO staff person from Quito might seem to be as foreign and unlike themselves—in language, culture, dress, style, education, worldview, or means of transportation—as an aid worker from Geneva or New York.” Two doctors from Rakhine State in Myanmar/Burma also differentiated between local and national staff, saying, “Top level NGO staff do not understand local needs and culture and are from Yangon—not locals.”

Hiring nationally, but not locally, sometimes frustrated people when equally qualified local people were not even considered for jobs. As two men from a settlement near a refugee camp in northern Kenya said, “NGOs come, but don't employ local people. When we went for jobs, Kenyans from afar got the jobs. Maybe they employ one person to make people happy. Because

local people can't farm and haven't gone to school, the perception is we can't do it. Other Kenyans think this way too and this is wrong—there are many people here in the village who are educated and literate. It makes taking children to school useless. They take our children to school, but they don't give them employment.” An educated Turkana woman from the same area agreed saying, “Maybe 20 years ago it was difficult to get qualified people—things have changed, but not so much in the minds of other people who come from outside this district.”

While local knowledge was highly valued, Listening Teams also heard about the benefits of international staff providing outside perspectives and bringing new ideas. One community leader in western Mindanao praised the role of an Italian priest who had contributed ideas beyond what was immediately imaginable in her impoverished community, saying, “It takes someone to dream for us.” His outside perspective had inspired confidence and locally driven changes. In Afghanistan a pharmacist noted, “We are happy that foreigners bring us new ideas and human rights. Everything is in the hands of God, *Inshallah* they do good work.”

### Cultural Communication

Many people described how cultural understanding and sensitivity was important for effective communication between staff and community members. Listening Teams heard that in some cultures, differences in communication styles prevent local people and staff from expressing their opinions and concerns and this, in turn, marginalizes local ideas and expertise. As a Cambodian woman working for an international donor stated, “International people don't understand the communication of the Cambodian people. We speak—explain our thinking—and then come to the point. Westerners put the point first, and then explain their thinking. This way Cambodians are disqualified from the beginning. We explain the idea rather than come to the point.”

There was a sentiment throughout Listening Exercises that aid agencies expect their local staff and partners to adapt to Western communication and business styles and to “basically be like the foreigner,” rather than the outside agencies adapting to local ways. People said this cultural insensitivity is undermining meaningful local staff participation, leadership and ownership of aid efforts.

### Language

Issues surrounding language were heard throughout the Listening Exercises, but were especially strong in Asian countries. People focused both on aid agencies' staff's ability to speak the local language and on how the high value of English competency impacted local hiring and staff involvement in decision making.

Many people talked about how local language skills greatly improve staff's ability to serve beneficiaries and to foster good relationships with community members and other staff. Numerous people talked about the importance of international staff learning and speaking the local language, believing that a shared language enables aid workers to communicate with all people, rather than limiting communication to the highly educated or making staff dependent on translators. Others noted that when international staff learn the local language, an important

implicit ethical message is sent that they value the local population. A beneficiary in Timor-Leste captured much of what Listening Teams heard when he said, “If foreign people speak Tetum, people think they care for and really want to hear you, listen to you, be friends—adapt to your situation through the language...Aid workers should be required to speak Tetum. If he knows the language he can talk to anyone, not only the ones who speak the language of the donor. It’s easy for the employees to talk to you if they have any problem—it creates a good environment in the work place.”

Some people believe that locals were often hired for their English ability over more relevant project-related skills. A former NGO staff member in Timor Leste explained that, “If your background is in agriculture but you don’t speak English, they won’t hire you even though you are qualified. There are many people who know how to do a job but due to the lack of English, the wrong people get the job.”

Others noted that even those who are successful in gaining employment are often still marginalized because of their language skills. As a Cambodian NGO employee explained, “INGO staff speak fast in English and use big words, and by doing so, shut local staff out of decision making. Those who are not adept at English or at communicating in the style of the foreign culture were likely to miss opportunities for promotion or meaningful engagement.” There was a feeling that much of this could be solved if international staff would recognize this and better accommodate language differences by adjusting their communication styles and/or making an effort to learn the local language.

### Staff Impartiality

The impartiality of staff was highly valued among people the Listening Project heard, and many believed that staffing decisions often play a significant role in determining who benefits from aid efforts. This came up most often in relation to local staff using their positions to prioritize assistance for their friends and relatives. A Lebanese NGO staff member in South Lebanon suggested that, “International organizations have to be present with their own staff members, to monitor and observe how aid is distributed. If you don’t do this, then people will bend to the pressure of their relatives and friends whom they owe a favor or wish to have something in return. We have observed it in our village for many years, and the organization’s headquarters in Beirut did not do anything about it. Some local employees had created a little kingdom in our village.”

In some places people talked about how aid agency staff often hired relatives or people from their same ethnic or religious groups, and that in some cases tensions have been exacerbated as people competed for jobs with aid agencies. However, a Kenyan woman recalled a solution that proved successful: “There used to be tension between local people and the rest because jobs in NGOs were given depending on who knew who. This changed in 1997, when [an expatriate] came up with a way of giving jobs by putting the national ID cards of the applicants in a sack and shaking to mix it, then a few were picked at random and these were the lucky ones who got the jobs. The jobs were then issued according to what one is good at. This way of giving jobs has reduced cases of rivalry amongst us as opportunities are distributed equally.” While this particular solution might not work in every organization or community, it illustrates the

importance that organizations understand the social and political dynamics in communities and find a hiring process that promotes fairness and impartiality.

When agencies and donors have tried to curtail favoritism by excluding local businesses from gaining contracts, people asked why and suggested that there might be a need to educate donors on how to fairly utilize and value local resources. In Aceh, for example, not hiring local staff and contractors to provide labor and supplies was seen as a missed opportunity for local investment. Many reported that aid agencies' tendency to hire "outsiders" for post-tsunami reconstruction overlooked the potential of creating a housing and livelihood strategy that engaged local people as carpenters and brick-makers.

In conflict-affected settings, we also heard that favoritism, or perceptions of association with certain groups, exacerbated conflicts between factions or created fear among beneficiary populations. A beneficiary in Kosovo said that he 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 Karen refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border we heard concerns regarding an aid agency hiring a Burmese doctor, whom the refugees feared would view them as enemies of the Burmese Government. The refugees felt they could not trust someone who was sent to work with them with permission from the very government that had been persecuting them.

### **Why Salaries and Spending Decisions Matter**

The second most prevalent issue that arose in conversations around staffing was the issue of salaries and spending priorities. Inequalities in salaries are a concern between international and local staff, between international and local organizations, as well as among local staff and communities. Salaries often influence the way staff motivations are perceived and how people feel about how organizations prioritize and spend their money.

#### *Salaries and Expertise*

Inequalities between the salaries of local and international staff stood out as a concern, particularly from the local staff of NGOs and CBOs and sometimes from government officials. People pointed to the implicit message that these significant inequalities sent about the value of local expertise and noted that the differences in compensation raised expectations of the quality of the highly paid international staff and consultants. Additionally, the inequality between salaries for local staff of aid agencies and the average incomes of community members was brought up, especially by people in communities. Echoing a common complaint, someone in Timor Leste said, "Advisors and consultants in particular were criticized as lacking in skills, yet making a high salary, causing an inflation of salaries of unskilled staff."

"The differences in local and international salaries are insulting," said a Lebanese government representative. "You have internationals coming with huge salaries but nationals probably do most of the work. This leads to frustration among locals. We need to revise our understanding of what we are worth. We have beautiful minds." Many people mentioned that there are local experts who are much more knowledgeable than the foreign staff and consultants that are paid

high prices as “experts” even though they are not familiar with the context in the country. As a man in Solomon Islands said, “Donors always hire outside consultants to do evaluation and designing work. Is there no one qualified in Solomon Islands to do the work? Aid meant to help the community goes back when hiring outside consultants. So donor, think good before becoming a donor.” A community member in Sri Lanka expressed a similar opinion, saying “Why don’t you value local knowledge and capacity? We have engineers and experts too.”

In a number of places, people suggested that the money spent on foreigner staff could go do much more if it were invested in hiring and building the capacity of local staff. A lawyer in Kosovo 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 man in Ecuador concurred saying, “We know of projects in which the foreign staff receive salaries that are so high, that this amount of money could pay the salaries of three local staff who could do the same work and maybe even better, because they know the communities and are part of this culture.”

There was a feeling among those we spoke to that for such a “high price tag” the international hires should be considerably more experienced and talented than locals, and be committed to building and mentoring local capacity. When international hires do not meet expectations or are viewed as being chosen over comparable local expertise, frustration rises. People point to the institutionalized prejudice as well as the financial frustration that high salaries flow back to support the economies of donor countries rather than staying in the country which is supposed to benefit from the assistance. A student in Solomon Islands noted that, “Aid has contributed to the high increase of unemployment. By coming in with their own agendas, they created very competitive job opportunities hence they need their own high skilled personnel—while our educated people/youth are the ones left without jobs.”

### *Perception of Motivations*

While an overwhelming majority of people recognized the positive intentions and impacts of aid organizations and their staff, questions were raised about the incentives to do aid work because of the high salaries paid by outside organizations and the opportunities for corruption that are then created. People noted that once local staff knew how to work the international system, they continued to seek jobs and exploit the comparatively high salaries, creating a “cartel of professionals” that may not have the needs of the communities in mind. As a man in Ecuador said, “Competition among NGO staff to be hired and then to have power, influence, and control over institutional resources can create scenarios of corruption and unethical values.”

Several people believe that an aid “mafia” has emerged, a small elite circle that controls access to coveted jobs and consulting opportunities. When projects or programs end, staff move on to the next position, based on their CV or on their connections, but with little evaluation of their skills, performance or actual results they have achieved. One shopkeeper in Mali likened staff members that float from NGO to NGO to “bees that draw nectar from flower to flower, but do they ever make honey?” In Burma/Myanmar, there were comments that NGO staff were only interested in high salaries and living in town, while the community expected them to want to live with the community, develop close relationships, and live at the level of local people.

Some questioned the motivations of international staff as well, and there was more distrust and suspicions in places where communities felt excluded from participating in program designs and implementation. A teacher working in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border commented, “People feel like the NGOs come to make money for themselves and their project, and then they leave.” A shop owner in Lebanon expressed similar views saying, “In my opinion, there is an imbalance in the aid distribution, because people who work with the aid organizations have their own agendas and plan and benefit themselves only.” In Bosnia, people noted that some of the expatriates who were managing projects were also very inexperienced and seemed to come to BiH for the adventure or the salary, rather than to truly get to know the communities and to mentor their staff. Such perceptions of personal motivations among staff were often a root cause for negative relationships between communities and aid agencies.

### Staffing and Spending Priorities

Many people talked about aid agency spending priorities, specifically focusing on how much was spent on staff versus spent directly on the communities. There was a perception in most countries that only between 10% to 40% of the money allocated for assistance efforts actually made it to the people and communities in need. A man in Bolivia suggested that much of the overhead goes to staff salaries, saying, “They (the NGOs) take advantage of the situation. They employ lots of people. The aid does not reach us...Seventy-five percent goes to personnel and 25% goes to the community.”

More than just salaries, spending on “luxuries and logistics” was also criticized. One aid beneficiary in Aceh said that a number of local staff have commented to her that, “The international staff look for the best when they are buying for themselves, such as when they buy cars or rent houses, but that when they arrange for programs for the tsunami victims, they are always trying to save money.”

A shopkeeper in Mali expressed a common sentiment heard in many locations, saying, “If we could reduce the ‘prestige expenses’, such as for fancy vehicles, expensive seminars and nice villas (for offices and/or staff accommodations paid by an organization), and if we could waste less, the savings would go where they should, to those who really need the assistance. Corruption is on such a large scale here. A staff member of an international or local NGO, after a few years, is able to build a house worth 30-40 million CFA francs. Is that proportional to his income? There is not an NGO director in town without a personal vehicle, a nice house, a big *boubou* (a fancy and expensive outfit) and a beautiful woman!”

On the other hand, we heard substantial support for aid agencies that spent funds employing local people, and that direct employment by aid agencies can help to achieve local economic development and socio-political goals. People in Kosovo identified local investment in jobs as having more than purely economic benefits, but also providing an effective peace building strategy. One Kosovar said, “The best approach for reconciliation is economic investment and multi-ethnic employment opportunities, not talking about minority rights.” In these contexts and others, NGO jobs were seen as an economic stimulus for communities and the local NGO sector.

People noted that the use of hiring practices to accomplish development goals was often neglected as a strategy, and that when creating local employment opportunities was built into aid efforts, it presented real benefits.

### **Capacity Building and Sustainability**

The Listening Teams heard many examples of how hiring practices and staff transitions within aid organizations were impacting project sustainability and local capacity building.

#### *Poaching and Building Talent*

We heard a variety of perspectives on the impacts of hiring local staff. Some believed the ability of international assistance organizations to pay higher salaries drew talented staff away from local governments and civil society organizations. Others believed that local staff gained important skills and experiences by working with experienced international organizations. As an Afro-Ecuadorian staff member of an NGO in Ecuador said, “I can say that I am a direct beneficiary of international aid. I was able to take advantage of the training opportunities, to improve. Now, after a lot of struggle, I have a life that allows me to eat every day. I can say that my life improved, and that of my family also, thanks to external aid.”

While NGOs were often reported to be “poaching” skilled staff from local CBOs, others noted that competent people are similarly being hired away from local and international NGOs by donors and big international organizations such as the United Nations. This hierarchical chain of hiring talented staff from other organizations was reported by some to cripple the very local capacity that plays an important role in creating sustainability of international assistance efforts.

People at the Thai-Burma border observed that, “As outside aid agencies come in and create their own programs, bringing resources that refugee organizations cannot compete with...CBOs have lost their staff to much better-paying outside agencies. As a result, these skilled people who once served an important function to the refugee community no longer give time and effort to their local organizations, contributing to a sense that the outsiders are now running the camps.”

Other people praised NGOs for hiring local staff and building the capacity of local leadership through on-the-job-training, mentoring, and exposure to international professional standards, noting that this raised the level and competence of local talent. We heard that many aid agency staff gained skills, experience, knowledge, and training that helped them to later start their own NGOs or to get jobs in government or the private sector. In Bosnia we heard that some former NGO staff now even train local governments in strategic planning and proposal writing, at much lower costs than foreign experts.

Positive comments on local capacity building through employment were strongly correlated with reports of aid agencies that empowered local staff to meaningfully participate in operations and decision-making. Members of the Listening Team in Kosovo (who were local staff of international NGOs) noted that they personally saw many benefits to their interaction and employment with international agencies no matter how long it lasted. They noted that they had learned new languages, been given opportunities for acquiring new skills through training,

developed a different work ethic, traveled, and built relationships across cultural boundaries that would last long after the aid agencies left.

People were much more likely to view outside agencies as poaching talented human resources and underutilizing local skills in communities where we heard about segmented relationships and responsibilities between local and international staff. An international aid worker in Cambodia commented on this problem saying, “So much lip service is paid to capacity building. But in reality the local people are treated like puppets.” Similarly, a translator working in Afghanistan noted, “Too often I see internationals put their foot on people’s mouths. They do not listen to us, there is capacity here but it is neglected.” The chairman of a local organization in Mindanao, Philippines, agreed saying, “Foreign agencies operate their own programs in our area. They employ their own people; pay their staff with high salaries. All this is harmful to the local communities. Foreign agencies’ [presence] is bad for the employment of and capacitating local people, and it’s bad for the image of the local NGOs and CSOs.”

There was a consensus across the contexts that supporting and building local capacity requires outside agencies to not only hire local staff, but also to empower them by giving them a high level of responsibility and treating them as professional equals.

#### *Short-term vs. Long-term Commitment of Staff*

The length of time staff committed to work in an area and for aid agencies was considered an important factor in creating sustainability and consistency in aid programs. International staff were criticized for not staying long enough to get to know the local context, to ensure a consistent focus on efforts and operations. We heard repeatedly that transitions to new staff are not handled well and that incoming international staff were not briefed on the cultural and community knowledge gained by the previous staff, and that operational practices are often changed during transitions. This was an issue in development contexts as much as in humanitarian situations, where there is frequently a high turnover rate. As the director of a Cambodian NGO shared, “I worked with 30 different [expatriate] people—we changed from one person to the other. Every time they change staff, they change the program and the tool: ‘You must use my tool.’” People believed this lack of consistency in leadership, knowledge and operating style negatively impacts the ongoing operations of programs.

In some places the short-term approaches and hiring practices of aid agencies can harm local organizations’ ability to sustain their efforts in the long-term. As a Listening Team member in Lebanon, observed: “The director of a local NGO we supported in Nahr al-Bared maybe earned 600 USD per month before the war. Then came the international donors, and they paid 1,000 USD per month—for a ‘volunteer’ who distributes aid packages! Like this you cannot work further.”

#### **Further Questions for Consideration**

How are organizational cultures and demands affecting the perception that aid agency staff lack local knowledge and cultural sensitivity?

To what extent are cultural and linguistic skills currently valued by international assistance organizations and/or explicitly incorporated into job descriptions, training and performance reviews?

What practices and policies can be adopted regarding the hiring of local staff to ensure fairness and to minimize favoritism in employment and the delivery of assistance? Can these be generalized or are they context specific?

How do aid organizations decide who to hire? What processes lead to the best outcomes in terms of using and supporting local talent?

When is hiring locally perceived as poaching local talent versus building local capacity? What indicators should aid agencies be looking at to determine the impact their hiring decisions are having on other local organizations and the government? How should they weigh their self-interest against the need to support strong local organizations and governments?