

**The Listening Project Issue Paper:  
The Cascading Effects of  
International Agendas and Priorities**

*September 2008*

## Background on the Listening Project and this Issue Paper

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international NGOs, donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, started the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance. The Listening Project seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by international actors. Those of us who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, environmental conservation, human rights, and/or peace-building efforts can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and judgments of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such international efforts.

The Listening Teams are made up of staff from international and local aid agencies, with facilitators from CDA. We did not work from pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, we told people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, we were interested to hear from them how they perceived these efforts. Most conversations were held with one or two individuals, while in some cases small group discussions were held. In many cases, conversations were not pre-arranged, and a Listening Team would travel to a community and strike up a conversation with whomever was available and willing to talk, including those who had and had not received or been involved with international assistance. Appointments were also made with government officials and other local leaders.

Over a period of three years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty countries. So far, the Listening Project has visited 13 including Aceh (Indonesia), Angola, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Thailand (two cases), Zimbabwe, and an exploratory visit to the US Gulf Coast. Reports from each of these field visits are available on the CDA website. The *Issue Papers* present a number of common and cross-cutting issues and themes which have been heard across these various contexts for discussion, feedback and reflection by aid workers and practitioners. The Listening Project continues to listen in new locations as we present these initial findings, and we will incorporate what we hear from people in the analysis so that we can integrate these insights into future aid work and, thereby, to improve its effectiveness.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those who have contributed deserve great appreciation for their time and generous logistical support and the insights and dedication of all the staff that participated in and supported the effort.

This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. **This document does not represent a final product of the project.** While this document may be cited, it remains a working document of a collaborative learning effort.

Many people across many different contexts describe problems arising from the external agendas, policies, priorities, fads and trends that influence the types and modes of international assistance that they receive or are able to access. They note how these external concerns frequently shift and change. They describe “cascading” effects they experience in communities, from “pre-packaged programming approaches” to the tendency to throw more money at new priorities rather than maintaining the focus on spending it more effectively. People also link the changing international agendas to the way the aid system is set up and functions (see the *International Assistance as a Delivery System* Issue Paper), and to their expectations of what international assistance can and should do (see the *Expectations of International Assistance* Issue Paper).

### **Top-Down Donor Agendas**

Many people, even those who live in remote areas, are remarkably savvy about international politics and global priorities and how these affect the assistance available to them. Many complain about how “the donor agendas,” which are usually driven by a political agenda set in donor-country capitals (or multiple agendas, some of which may be competing), affect the decisions about and outcomes of international aid efforts, without regard for the real situations and local priorities in their areas.

For example, in Bosnia, virtually all of the donors wanted to encourage the return of refugees and recovery efforts partly to reduce the burden of the refugee populations in their own countries (especially European donors, which hosted many Bosnian refugees during the war). Donors also were pursuing a multi-ethnic “reconciliation” strategy as an international priority. As a result, they funded many efforts to support the return of refugees. Many international and local NGOs then implemented these “returns” projects, even though this was not what many of the people on the ground wanted at the time.

From an over-arching donor agenda such as this, many other aspects of international assistance are determined such as who gets aid, how, when (often according to local people – at the “wrong” time), where, for what, etc. That is, an external agenda and priority can shape not only what gets funded, but many of the smaller (but significant) details of how aid flows. As one woman in Bosnia said, “donors and all their projects determine in advance what will be reconstructed and what will not.”

*Zimbabwe provided another interesting example of this. Many people there talked about how the international community’s disapproval of Zimbabwe’s governance has meant that most assistance comes as emergency aid rather than development aid. As a result, they receive little 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 living with HIV/AIDS. \*<sup>1</sup>*

---

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

*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!” 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?”*

*Similarly, in Kosovo, people describe many different negative and inappropriate impacts of “the donor agenda.” They noted 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) sometimes increased inter-group animosity. They resented the imposition of others’ priorities on their crisis and often felt aid was not targeted fairly and according to need.*

*These external agendas often set up perverse incentives. As one person said, “We went to talk to [an international] agency and 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?’”*

*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, but they have to have problems with each other too!” In another community, people explained that they had gotten a school, a health clinic and an electrical grid in their village, noting, “We got all this aid because the village was ‘multi-ethnic.’ The NGOs were fulfilling their own conditions. We heard this on TV.”*

*These comments are common. In many places, people describe the negative consequences of the labeling that goes with external priorities on who should get assistance. As we heard in Aceh, when contributions are raised to serve “tsunami victims,” people who are homeless because of conflict do not qualify for support. Likewise, when outsiders decide that people affected by HIV/AIDS or refugees are the “most needy,” others who may have suffered equally often have no access to help.*

Despite increased donor efforts at harmonizing aid agendas and efforts, in a number of places people noted that many international assistance efforts do not connect to the host government’s strategy and plans. When the Listening Team visited a government official in Kenya, he had the district-level Poverty-Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) lying on his desk. With this in front of him, he told the team, “If someone comes here and wants to do something, we don’t say no because we don’t want to say no to donors. There is a disconnect between the PRSPs and other documents and what donors fund. No one reads or refers to them. Donors go where they want, not where they are needed, especially in projects channeled through the government.”

While there are many concerns about the imposition of outside agendas and priorities, many people say that they understand that all groups have different agendas and priorities, and that what is important is to be able to discuss their local ideas with those who are trying to be helpful so that they can decide together how to prioritize the often competing agendas and needs and to come up with solutions that are agreeable to all.

## Shifting Priorities

People also talked about how the funding priorities and donor trends seem to shift every couple of years, affecting the types of assistance that are available. They say that the result is that donors and aid agencies have “projectitis” and develop projects to fit what is “trendy” or “sexy” at the time. As one government official in Kenya said, “Projects just come because there is money and people may not need what donors bring. Policy-makers and donors sometimes push projects from the top-down through agreements made at the national level with no local input. Donors should fund a ‘basket’ [of options] and let them propose locally from their priorities so that communities can solve their problems on their own.”

A university lecturer and development consultant in Kenya described this common problem described by people in many countries, saying “International development partners (International Organizations, Bilaterals, and NGOs) have a tendency to have agendas which change. For instance, one year the emphasis will be on the water sector, then HIV/AIDS, gender, etc. They are enthusiastic over about 5 years and then their priorities change. Projects are time-specific, but you can’t talk about 5 years to change people’s lives—you leave communities with ruins, not development. Projects are donor dependent without sustainability. Most agencies think they know more than communities do and what they are interested in may not match communities’ priorities. For example, a [donor agency] program brought cheese to the Samburu [a nomadic tribe] area to increase the protein in the diet because that was a sign of development to [the donor], and people melted it like ghee and put it on their skin to protect them from the sun instead.”

## Pre-Packaged Programming

*People also resent assistance that is pre-determined and inappropriate. They say things such as, “NGOs are inflexible in the types of assistance (they provide)...it is top-driven and is simply channeled down to us.” “Some international NGOs come with their own agendas and are driven and influenced by the priorities set by their donors.”*

*One Listening Team summarized what they had heard, noting “There are common complaints that NGOs take a blanket approach and arrive with pre-planned programs.” Another suggested that, “NGOs are often bound by rigid proposal submission deadlines set by donors and this hinders their ability to consult communities.”*

*Listening Teams have heard many people express their anger at the arrogance of outsiders who pre-determine need in categories that they feel are biased and inappropriate in their society, or when they apply programming approaches that have been developed elsewhere in quite different contexts. Some used the word “insulted” to describe how they felt when NGOs brought pre-packaged assistance such as very low microcredit loans and training programs based on employment opportunities in other countries rather than their local economy and markets.*

For instance in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma Border, a long-time aid worker explained that, “Now there is a shift in the INGOs to ‘livelihood’ or ‘micro-credit.’ All NGOs are doing

these projects...But local women's NGOs have been doing these projects for years...NGOs hire outside 'experts' on income generation. The expert did not talk to the women's groups, did not come to the income-generation shops, he did not consider the realities of doing income generation in a refugee setting...He did not consider the skills people had, or how to link the market with the skills. We have not seen the impact of this yet."

*Resentment is also increased when people are urged to "participate" in program planning and design, but they soon see that choices and decisions have already been made—by outsiders.* Local people feel that they have little power in the decision making process and that the options that are open to them are often prescribed and proscribed by donors and agency headquarters miles from their realities. They say things such as, "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." "It seems as if NGOs need to empty their warehouses."

On the positive side, some people talked about how using "pre-packaged" processes—for instance truly participatory planning and implementation mechanisms—can have positive effects. People appreciate when "pre-packaged" aid has built on past experiences and lessons learned—so long as they are applicable and appropriate to their particular context.

### **The Amount of Money is Not the Problem**

Interestingly, as people discuss outside agendas and priorities, they are for the most part *not* complaining about outside limitations in funding. The amount of money available for international assistance—also set by outside agendas—is not named as a problem by many local people.

In fact, in more than one area affected by the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia, people spoke of the "excessive generosity of international agencies" noting that they received "too much." In every place we have visited, even in places which have received less attention and funding, people talk instead about the significant amounts of waste and mismanagement of resources, noting for instance, that "with all of the aid that has come into Kenya, it should be a heaven!" They continually note how little has been accomplished in relation to the resources that have been provided.

One aspect of this relates to the "projectitis" mentioned above. When external aid agencies have pre-conceived ideas about what to do, and how to do it, they set into motion systems of aid delivery that, people tell Listening Teams, are often wasteful. In several different countries, people have described the "water bottle" effect where assistance is passed from donors to international NGOs or contractors, to local NGOs or sub-contractors, to community-based organizations, and finally to people in the community, so that the last in line gets only a very small amount of the water after so many have taken a sip. That is, pre-packaging often involves ways of working as well as the focus of programs and, when outsiders set up systems of delivery that involve a number of intermediary organizations, local people note that this results in much "wastage."

People tell the Listening Teams their ideas about how the “massive funds” of outsiders could be better spent in terms of the focus of spending. Some point out that if agencies would analyze the situation with local people and agree on how best to address the challenges, they would have greater impact. For example, in tsunami-affected areas of Thailand, many families were given boats that were much larger than what they had used before. When asked how this happened, people said “They just asked ‘what do you want?’ We said ‘a boat.’ They bought the wrong kind of boat, too large, too expensive and we can’t fish with it... They should have asked our opinion because it’s such a waste of money. They could have spent it on something better.”

In other countries, Listening Teams have heard similar ideas about how, using the available (and abundant) resources of aid, more could be done to address common, systemic problems. People suggest that donors and aid agencies should analyze the situation with local people and combine their resources, rather than each running its own projects. One example cited had to do with a drought-prone location in Kenya where separate agencies undertook small water projects. People suggested that if these agencies had combined their resources, they could have developed a comprehensive, lasting water system that would have addressed this wide-spread problem. .

There are two interesting aspects of this commentary as it relates to external agendas. First, in Listening Project conversations about “pre-packaged” programs or projects, people often describe the mis-direction or lack of focus of programming. They say that decisions made by outsiders about priorities and about *what* to do signal arrogance and disrespect in which international agencies are seen to act as if local people do not have the analytic ability and wisdom to discuss and analyze the major issues affecting their lives.

The second aspect has to do with donor agendas about *how* aid programs should be delivered and waste. As mentioned before, when aid is delivered through many intermediaries, much of the funding does not reach the intended beneficiaries or participants.

Even with this “wastage” in the system, however, people talk more often about how little has been accomplished with all of the money that has been spent rather than about the importance of having more. As a government official in Ecuador said, “Much has been done, but not what should have been done, nor in the way it should have been done. We have to place more heart than technique in this thing called development, and [external] cooperation does not put heart into it.”

### **Policies Need to Change, Not Just Projects, For Greater Impact**

Many people are aware of the importance of international donors’ policies and some point to failures of these policies to take into account factors that are, they say, very important in context and to improving their lives.

For example, many people note that humanitarian assistance is often not linked to or followed by development assistance to help people recover their assets and reduce their vulnerability to future disasters. Many people discussed with sophistication and longing their wish that aid agencies and donors would invest more in addressing the root causes of poverty and vulnerability. Everyone appreciates relief assistance. However most also note that “food aid does not build assets.” As

several people in Ethiopia said, “We are still poor, even though we are being helped. Aid is life-saving, but not life changing” and that “aid organizations need to alleviate poverty and bring change to people’s lives.”

We have heard many, many stories about international assistance projects, but not very many about policies changing and addressing the underlying causes of people’s situations or underdevelopment. For instance, many of the refugees who have lived in camps for years on the Thai-Burma border said that in the absence of being able to go home, what they wanted most was not more assistance, but permission to travel outside the camps and to work without fear of arrest. However, there is little pressure to change the policies which prevent this.

Some people even question whether international assistance is truly meant to support their development or if it is to just make their poverty more comfortable. As an Afro-Ecuadorian government official in Ecuador said, “The proposals that international cooperation and external aid bring are a placebo, a solution that in reality solves nothing.” People suggest that if donors truly want to support them, they will listen to them and involve them in the decision making, not forcing their outside agendas and priorities which may not be appropriate or the best solution to their problems. If they do this, people believe donors and aid agencies will spend their money more effectively and achieve more lasting change.

### **Further Questions for Consideration**

Which outside agendas and priorities are helpful in supporting local efforts and which are inappropriate? How do we know?

How can donors set policies for their aid—based on their own learning of what works and does not and on their own principles of what matters and what does not—and still listen sufficiently to local voices about local priorities?

What is the appropriate role of host or partner governments in setting agendas and priorities? If people say that the government is not responsive to local needs, but donors have worked closely with and are supporting the government, what should they do?

What is the role of education/training/curricula in shaping how policy makers and aid workers set agendas and approach development? Is this leading to more pre-packaged assistance and/or emphases on “toolboxes” of solutions to very complex problems?

Why do we keep concentrating on raising more resources as the way to improve the effectiveness of international aid, when people seem to care much more about how it is spent than about the amounts?

What do we need to do, as a broad community of international actors, to address the concerns raised by people as reported above?