

**The Listening Project Issue Paper:**  
**Whose Development?**  
**Aid Recipient Perspectives on Ownership**

*September 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 Issue Papers

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.<sup>1</sup>

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 used an open-ended approach and 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 reflection, discussion, and feedback 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 and their suggestions for improving the effectiveness of international assistance efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com)

## Whose Development? Aid Recipient Perspectives on Ownership

The issue of ownership has been at the forefront of policy discussions on aid and development effectiveness in recent years. The Paris Declaration identified *Ownership* as one of the five key principles to make foreign aid more effective. The goal is for “partner countries to exercise effective leadership over their development policies and strategies, and coordinate development actions.”<sup>2</sup> Further refining this principle, the Accra Agenda for Action added that ownership should mean that “countries have more say over their development processes through wider participation in development policy formulation, stronger leadership on aid coordination and more use of country systems for aid delivery.”<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the Paris Declaration envisaged ownership in terms of national government-led development strategies, the Accra Agenda for Action acknowledged the role of civil society organizations as development actors with a legitimate role to play—not only in the delivery of services, but also in formulating policies and strengthening local capacities and ownership. Recent policy-level discussions on aid effectiveness have focused on the need for an even more inclusive approach to ownership, where the citizens of countries have a greater voice and role in their own development.

While these discussions take place in capitals around the world, what do those on the receiving end of international assistance efforts—the people in poor communities who are supposed to benefit most from aid—have to say about the issue of ownership? Unsurprisingly, the Listening Project found that results on the ground are lagging behind the ideals articulated in these and other policy documents. People in recipient societies suggest that greater ownership can be achieved by engaging community members in making decisions which will affect their lives;<sup>4</sup> sharing control, information and responsibility; planning appropriate timeframes; and forming and maintaining effective relationships between local organizations and local and national governments.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, aid recipients and local development actors emphasize that more holistic approaches, which strengthen local capacities and lead to greater sustainability, are needed to increase national and local ownership of development efforts.

### PROMOTING BROAD-BASED OWNERSHIP

“If people don’t feel proprietorship for the project, there will be no development. They must take ownership of the process, but only if the methodology is developed together.  
*Young indigenous radio announcer in Ecuador*”

People in aid recipient societies talk about several issues that international aid agencies and donors must address in order to make aid more effective and to support broad-based ownership of development efforts. One of these issues is *control*—of processes, of projects and of information. Since international assistance agencies often work in partnership at both the local and national levels, how they approach these relationships has an effect on levels of local ownership.

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<sup>2</sup> OECD. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/41/34428351.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> For more, read the Listening Project Issue Paper, [“Discuss Together, Decide Together, Work Together.”](#)

<sup>5</sup> For more, read the Listening Project Issue Paper, [“Structural Relationships in the Aid System.”](#)

## ***Sharing Control, Information and Responsibility***

“People are either dependent on aid or they are engaged with it—they are participating...  
If people are not involved with the project they will not own it and take care of it.  
If the people are invested in the development, they will take care of that development.”

*A local NGO staff person in Cambodia*

Local people frequently described the extent of their engagement and influence in decision-making processes as an important indicator for the level of ownership they felt over development efforts. They pointed out that when donors and aid agencies make all of the decisions, local people do not share the sense of ownership and will most likely be unable or unwilling to extend the life of development initiatives once the aid organization leaves or the funding ends. In a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border, a Karen elder and education leader shared his frustration, saying “The NGOs control things. If they want you to do this, you have to do it. We can’t refuse their suggestion. Like we take power from them, or challenge them. We must stay quiet and do. We are afraid they will cut off their aid... I don’t want to discuss this. It’s an old story for them, they don’t care.” Similarly, a senior official in Afghanistan’s Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development said, “Five years ago people were saying we’re building a culture of dependency here. Now people say we have crossed over. There are things we cannot seem to do without outside help, because we have gotten used to this.”

Many local people felt that information about projects, approaches, and timeframes is often controlled by outside agencies and not shared with them. When aid recipients do not have access to this information, it makes them feel powerless and unable to put themselves in the driver’s seat when it comes to developing their communities and their country. One man in a village in Angola expressed a desire frequently heard, saying, “If we knew what we were going to receive, we could make a plan. As it is, we can only begin to plan from the moment that the aid is received.”

“There are many projects that are prepared from a desk, with low levels of participation from the people and therefore, little or no certainty that the processes can be sustained.”  
*Community member in Ecuador*

In many places people described development efforts that were not sustained because implementing organizations did not effectively engage local people in project management processes and technical maintenance tasks. A member of an association for handicapped persons in Mali said, “We always receive assistance through third-party intermediaries. It is always others who come to design and implement projects on our behalf. We don’t even manage our own projects and they often do not understand our real needs.”

This pattern is not new, and in recent years there have been some increased efforts to share control over aid efforts at national and local levels. People in a number of countries described how some NGOs gradually transitioned funding and control of projects into local hands, which increased their feelings of ownership and the sustainability of the efforts. For instance, a community leader in Bolivia observed, “The way in which the NGO has gradually increased our obligation to provide investment has led to our taking charge of the work. In the past it was 100% that they [the NGO] contributed, then 80%, then 60%, and presently it is 50% which it [the NGO] provides, and the community the other 50%. This was done in such a manner that it generated an attitude of care for the works, so that in the future the leaders educated by [the NGO] will want to assume the responsibility for everything that has been done to date with the different institutions.”

Similarly in Kosovo, people engaged in a school reconstruction project funded with 30% of community labor and funds remarked, “Our participation was very valuable—we wanted to own it. Even if we didn’t always have the material support, we gave the moral support. That was always, always there.” Local farmers in a remote village in eastern Cambodia argued that road construction should involve village residents and the local authorities to ensure local ownership: “This is not an NGO road, not a government road, but the villagers’ road. We are the ones who are going to use it so we should contribute too. We are willing to collect money to pay for the road—we can take the money to the Commune Council or to the NGO for them to build it. We won’t be able to contribute all the labor, because we have farming duties, but we can be part of this development project.”

People also described an increased sense of ownership when they had control over the selection of appropriate projects and when they took responsibility for them. In several pastoralist communities in Ethiopia, people were engaged in the selection and nomination of community members for skills training and they commended NGOs’ participatory methods. One pastoralists’ association member said, “We are not looking to the outside for support. That is why we are feeling ownership.” In Kosovo, a community member suggested, “[The international community] should try and share responsibility amongst Kosovars – this did not happen before. We want to be consulted more. We have a proverb: You can’t make a good deal without the owner.” A member of a local Commune Council in Cambodia explained, “Participation is important because the projects are for them – to meet their needs, if they feel ownership they take care of the project. That’s why getting people’s needs and meeting them is important.”

“The major input from outside was the irrigation scheme built in 1987, and another one from 1992 is still working. The organization that built it consulted the community about their problems before giving assistance and thereby helped people to build their capacity. They were consulted before the project was implemented, and a partnership was struck where the farmers provided labor while the materials and equipment were provided by the organization. This has instilled ownership such that when the water gets spoilt we organize ourselves and repair the damage.”

*Farmer in Eastern Province, Kenya*

People made a number of recommendations about how aid providers can better engage aid recipients and local communities<sup>6</sup> to share control and responsibility over aid processes and projects, such as:

- “Education and awareness create ownership. Stop giving handouts. Donors should use their billions wisely or keep it! Encourage donors to give their time instead of money and encourage local participation to import skills in them.” *Priest in Kenya*
- “The [project] executing group and the donor must share the responsibility for the project. They must be partners, but not just in name. The power relations must change. Regarding qualifications... look, there is a lot of capacity, many talents, and much knowledge in the communities, but there is always a need for training to be able to better implement projects. We all need it, not only the people of the communities.” *Former Minister of Housing in Ecuador*

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this issue, read the Listening Project Issue Paper, [“Discuss Together, Decide Together, Work Together”](http://www.cdainc.com). [www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com).

## ***Working in Partnership with Local and National Government Institutions***

Donors often emphasize ownership by saying they will cede control over development efforts to national government structures and support national development strategies. However, particularly in post-conflict countries, people suggested that the local governments should have been more involved in international assistance efforts and that donors should have consulted with them more and built their capacity better, rather than focusing so much on national level institutions. For instance in Bosnia-Herzegovina, many elected local officials and local government staff felt that they should have greater responsibility and control, and that the international organizations and NGOs should have done a better job of informing and consulting with them about the needs, priorities, and projects in their areas.

At the provincial and district levels, local development workers, local officials and community members also discussed the importance of effective partnerships between international aid providers and local governments. In Sri Lanka, a local staff person of an INGO explained, “If you work with the local government you build more capacity and ensure sustainability. We’ve learned our lessons from mistakes we made. In the past, we focused almost entirely on village-based or community-based organizations, trained local village committees to write proposals and apply for funding. After we phased out, these committees fell apart because they didn’t have a proper network with the local government.”

People felt that by engaging government at all levels in aid efforts, international assistance agencies could build or strengthen local capacity and increase their sense of ownership, which is critical to sustaining the results. A person in Aceh commented, “It is better if the government does the work that NGOs are doing, because it is a long-term effort and international NGOs are only here temporarily.” Similarly, a local NGO staff member in East Timor said, “If INGOs implement directly, they don’t know the basic needs, and just bring their programs. When they leave, communities cannot see the impact. But if they go through local NGOs or the local government, they can build up capacity of organizations there. After they leave, the local organizations can provide assistance without the internationals.”

“When the funds are directly downloaded to the community, and they have watchdogs to ensure transparency and public information on how it’s being spent, then that is people empowerment. There is no room for corruption because the fund is directly downloaded to the barangay [village/ward administrative unit]. They really feel that they own the project. They are learning to manage their own project, and all the money goes directly to the community.” *A provincial social welfare officer in the Philippines*

Conversely, in many locations, local people also felt that national and local government institutions were not capable of exercising effective management and ownership of aid resources—due to lack of capacity, lack of resources, political influences, or corruption.<sup>7</sup> Many people linked their weak sense of ownership to lack of participation in development processes, saying that their government does not involve them in decision making and does not effectively communicate decisions to its citizens.

Many also complained that elected officials are often more focused on serving their political interests than addressing the citizens’ interests. A staff person at a UN agency in East Timor voiced concerns about this disconnect when trying to increase local ownership, saying, “The UN and donors work through the government, even though the government does not reflect the needs of the people. Water,

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this issue, read the Listening Project Issue Paper, [Dealing with Corruption](http://www.cdainc.com). [www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com).

for example is a basic necessity, but not a national priority. Whether it's true or not, we have to follow the project goals of the government. That is the UN mandate. How much the government reflects the interest of the people is a different issue."

In light of these challenges, many aid recipients and local NGOs expressed a desire for a direct partnership with donors and aid agencies working in their communities and often drew a connection between strong relationships and increased community-level ownership and long-term sustainability. A Lebanese coordinator of a local NGO stated, "We need strategic, long-term partnerships with donors. The impact doesn't come overnight. We need to know that we can rely on their support not only tomorrow. If they want to make a change that lasts, they need to start taking longer breaths."

### **HOLISTIC AID: REDUCING DEPENDENCY AND MAKING CHANGE SUSTAINABLE**

"When the training that they provide will allow us to no longer need the experts that come to the community, then we will thank them for everything they have taught us." *Day laborer in Ecuador*

People in aid recipient societies repeatedly drew distinctions between international assistance that contributed to sustainable results and improvements in their quality of life, and what they saw as piecemeal assistance efforts with limited long-term effects. For instance, many people who received assistance explained that what they received was only part of what they needed to improve their livelihoods—such as income-generation training with no capital to start a business, seeds without instructions, chickens without vaccines, and products/training with no market. When this happened, there was often a lack of "buy in" to the project and less ownership over the investments and other development efforts. People consistently raised the issue that aid was often supply-driven and was not being conceived as a coherent, holistic package to support positive and sustainable changes in their lives.

A person in Mindanao, Philippines gave the following definition of sustainability: "Projects should be lasting, not a one shot deal. The question project implementers should have in mind is, 'How does the fund[ing] help address issues in communities?'" Others used words such as, "lasting" and "uplifted" when they described sustainable changes resulting from aid efforts. But all too often, Listening Teams heard stories of projects that failed to support lasting changes and of development efforts that halted as soon as the project funding ended or the implementing agency left. Sometimes projects failed because they did not align with local priorities,<sup>8</sup> but oftentimes change was not sustained because there was insufficient local capacity, resources, and ownership to continue the efforts without external funding or after agencies left.

People consistently discussed the importance of providing assistance in a more comprehensive, holistic way that builds on and strengthens local capacities and ownership without increasing dependency. A director of a bilingual education program in Ecuador commented, "Projects must be based not only on needs, but also on the culture and the way of thinking of the people. The focus should be on human growth instead of only needs. If not, it leads to dependency, expecting that the donations will continue." Many people mentioned the role of local governments, noting that government capacity needs to be adequate if the government is expected to maintain the same level of services after aid efforts end. Local people also pointed to the importance of advance notice of aid agencies' departures, citing that

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this issue, read the Listening Project Issue Paper, "[The Cascading Effects of International Agendas and Priorities.](#)"

unorganized departures or closures of programs can leave people vulnerable and inhibit their ability to plan for the future.

### ***Strengthening Local Capacity***

“We ask international agencies that come into our district to build capacity so that people can begin solving their problems on their own. If the international or local NGO is doing everything then the people will remain dependent and will not build the necessary skills for the future. We don’t want the people to feel that it is a ‘donor project,’ we want people to own the project.”

*A district official in Zimbabwe*

Although many people described aid efforts in terms of material items and tangible outputs—such as infrastructure, schools or clinics—many more mentioned the need for more and better capacity building, linking improved local capacities to sustainable results and greater ownership. Many local people describe how capacity-building and training has introduced new knowledge and changed their communities. One district government official in Ethiopia highlighted a particularly successful capacity building project in which an NGO provided training in construction skills to a group of villagers who were then employed by the local district for construction projects in the area.

“I have gained skills in leadership, bookkeeping, and community organizing. And even though I haven’t finished school, these trainings give me the capacities as if I had finished school. I see other people who have finished their education that have no work and less capacity. But I have more skills which I’ve used to apply for a position with the provincial government, where I am now working in community organizing.” *Community advocate in Mindanao, Philippines*

Similar accounts were heard in other agricultural and pastoralist communities in Ethiopia about training for traditional birth attendants and veterinary services that equipped people in the community with needed skills. As one woman trained as a birth attendant said, “The knowledge is in our minds. We can pass it on and no one can take it from us.” In Ecuador, a community leader proudly stated, “We believe that we have developed sufficient capacities for assuming the responsibilities of our own development. We want the right to decide on our development and to manage our projects. Our leaders have demonstrated capacity and transparency in their work.”

However, as with all other aspects of aid efforts, people discussed how capacity building should be based on an understanding of local needs, capacities and desires. Providing job training to people without any capital or access to new jobs, or teaching skills that are not culturally appropriate will not create sustainable change. One example in Angola involved female ex-combatants whose only option for skills-building was in bricklaying and masonry, which are not trades typically undertaken by women in this area. One of the female masons-in-training observed, “It is difficult to find a job [as a woman] with this skill.” Many people observed that training does not equal capacity building and that the quality of technical trainings they received were inadequate and would not lead to lasting changes. As a young man in Ecuador said, “The NGOs give us workshops, but these are always superficial and do not provide a formation of a professional nature. This is what prevents the people from ever getting ahead.”

Many people offered advice and recommendations for ways that aid providers can strengthen capacity and ownership at the local level such as:

- “There is help that does not help. It goes against the people. Aid must respect the people and promote their empowerment. The people have to feel that the project is theirs. Politics has a

great influence, so the project cannot ignore this. With national aid, the situation is the same.”  
*Government official in Ecuador*

- “Money is not reinvested into projects like improving cocoa or coconut farming. Short training does not help people to understand financial statements, which are one of the main criteria to approve loans to local farmers.” *Banker in Solomon Islands*
- “NGOs should encourage more local people to be responsible for their region and development than giving hopes. Let the people realize that the ability to change is in their hands.” *Young woman in Myanmar/Burma*
- “The schemes which have been successful have big ownership, with contributions from the community, which makes them value them more. Projects that are funded 100% from the top down are not successful. Donors should not look at communities as poor — they have ideas and resources.” *District Agricultural Officer in Kenya*

### ***Planning for a Future without Aid***

People spoke frequently about timeframes for assistance and noted that different circumstances call for different durations of donors’ and aid agencies’ presence and investments. There is a fine line between providing enough support to help communities develop themselves and creating aid-dependent societies. People acknowledged that receiving aid without a clear timeframe for when it will end can lead to dependency and discourage local ownership. If assistance providers show no signs of leaving, people acknowledged that communities will inevitably choose to rely on those organizations for as long as possible, rather than lead their own development. A sub-district official in Thailand explained, “Villagers who received lots of assistance kept expecting more and did not know when it would stop. They stopped working. Now they all realized that the international NGOs are decreasing their assistance or leaving altogether so people began gardening and working again.”

People in most places emphasized that they are able and want to “stand on their own feet.” They expected aid providers to leave and phase out operations after a certain amount of time. In one community in Sri Lanka, people said that after a child sponsorship organization phased out its programs, the villagers continued to pool resources and to help each other, noting, “It is ok if INGOs leave. We don’t expect them here all the time. But when they just give monthly cash assistance, many people become dependent. We don’t like that. We want to stand on our own feet.”

Many people requested more follow-up and technical assistance before and after projects formally end and assistance organizations leave, and some pointed out that projects and aid agencies need to have carefully designed phase out or exit strategies to ensure that there is local ownership. This point was emphasized in many countries by the frequent observation that assistance efforts were often stuck, discontinued, and left unfinished after the project funding ended or the outside implementing agency left. Local people acknowledged that this was also due to their own lack of training, experience and capacity—particularly in planning, strategic thinking, administrative procedures, and other skills needed to manage their own development efforts.

To avoid creating unmet expectations, disappointment and other negative consequences from the abrupt ending of aid efforts, staff in local organizations made a few specific suggestions:

- “If funding will be discontinued, donors should inform you early so you can plan for it. Otherwise the people are upset. Organizations should have an exit strategy and give one year’s notice.”  
*Palestinian NGO director in Beirut, Lebanon*

- “Exit and phase out strategies need to be discussed with local government and other relevant organizations from the start. It should be part of the capacity building process for local government units to plan for sustainability.” *Director of a peace and development initiative funded by foreign donors in Mindanao, Philippines*
- “NGOs at times fail to incorporate the communities in our planning process, thus imposing our activities on them, leading to disastrous results, for instance not making use of the implemented projects. Most NGOs don’t have exit strategies once projects are complete and they need to equip the community with skills on how to manage these projects.” *Local staff of an NGO in Western Kenya*

## CONCLUSION

Ownership of development efforts is important at multiple levels. While donors aspire to enabling ‘national ownership,’ this does not automatically equate to ‘local ownership.’ On one hand, a state-centric focus on national level ownership can reinforce ingrained political biases in the distribution of development benefits. On the other hand, evidence suggests that local and international civil society organizations working in close proximity to communities can also act in ways that disable rather than enable community aspirations. Supporting local ownership of development efforts requires a willingness to listen<sup>9</sup> and respond to feedback,<sup>10</sup> as well as a commitment to share information, power and control.

The voices and observations highlighted in this Issue Paper offer salient feedback to all agencies involved in the aid delivery system.<sup>11</sup> Despite differing experiences and perspectives, people on the receiving end of international assistance consistently insist that aid providers should approach their relationships and aid efforts in ways that genuinely allow local people, aid recipients, local NGOs, and governments to define the terms for local and national development processes and to take ownership over the results. A director of a local women’s NGO in Mindanao summed it up this way, “Filipinos should be in the driver’s seat on the development and peacebuilding road in Mindanao. Too many outside peace experts are here to do peacebuilding work. We have the skills locally and need to consolidate and work together better...What I like about our donor is that they like to learn from us. They say they learn a lot from our seminars and our process. In order to do that, they spend time with us and participate in these discussions. A donor is a true partner if they are listening to us. If they listen and learn they will accompany you and won’t dictate. We share an understanding: we are in this together. A lot more is possible then.”

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this issue, read the Listening Project Issue Paper, “[The Importance of Listening.](#)”

<sup>10</sup> For more on this issue, read the Listening Project Report, [Feedback Mechanisms in International Assistance Organizations](#)

<sup>11</sup> For more on this issue, read the Listening Project Issue Paper, “[International Assistance as a Delivery System.](#)”