COLLABORATIVE
LEARNING PROJECTS

The Listening Project Issue Paper

International Assistance as a Delivery System

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.

Background to this Issue Paper

As the Listening Project has worked with many international and local NGO colleagues to arrange Listening Exercises in a broad range of countries, we have repeatedly had similar experiences. People in agencies' headquarters and in field sites are genuinely interested in participating in this collaborative listening and learning effort, and talk about its importance and relevance to their work. However, time after time, we have run into challenges in organizing the field work and in getting agency staff to be able to commit the time needed to listen, analyze and reflect on what people in recipient communities have to say about international assistance efforts. The fact that this pattern was repeated under such varied circumstances and by so many competent and committed people led to the Listening Project's analysis that many of the challenges were somehow intrinsic to the way that the international assistance system has developed and is currently conceptualized and organized.

This Issue Paper lays out the evidence assembled by the Listening Project that explains how and why this pattern is virtually inevitable under the circumstances of today's international assistance system. It suggests that the current "business model" of the international assistance system actually makes open-ended listening to local people, and the arrangements to do so, very difficult indeed. This Issue Paper differs from the other ones in that it does not only report on what we have heard from people in recipient societies, but also includes the evidence from CDA's experience in organizing the Listening Exercises and from discussions with a number of aid agency colleagues.

A Brief and Partial History

In years past, international assistance was seen as an act of charity where people who wanted to "do good" and to help people in need took up individual and collective initiatives to try to respond to emergencies and poverty in other parts of the world. Over time, as the idea and mechanisms of "charity" were challenged, international aid providers sought a different model— one that would see beyond "victims" and instead engage people in poor and troubled societies in a joint enterprise of humanitarianism, peacebuilding, human rights promotion and/or development. For some years, much of this effort involved sending "experts" from countries that were developed to those that were still developing local capacity as "advisors," "technical experts," "community development workers," "peace builders," etc.

This approach still seemed to many people to be too externally dominated, so other conceptualizations and models were sought. At the same time, evaluations and reflection began to show a number of ways that international assistance went awry, falling short of its goal to be helpful. Development projects were seen to favor men and disadvantage women; assistance was seen to result in dependency; humanitarian aid was seen to inadvertently exacerbate conflict in some warring societies. And a number of exposés were written that recounted the wastage of assistance—inappropriate foods, out-of-date drugs, seeds that arrived too late, goods stored in warehouses that never got delivered, and so on.

The Search for Other Models Led to Current Aid "Delivery System" Business Model

As concerned people and aid organizations sought to improve international assistance, they looked around to see what other approaches seemed to work better. For many, a number of different approaches that have improved the efficiency of many businesses in the private sector appeared to offer positive options to improve the aid delivery system.

In recent years, several trends that show a shift from a charity to a delivery system business model are observable. A number of international NGOs have either added corporate representatives to their Boards of Directors or, in some cases, hired people from the private sector to be their own CEOs. Building on the cumulative evidence of multiple evaluations, international donors (such as government development agencies and U.N. agencies) and NGOs focused their attention on improving efficiency. This involved development of "criteria for investment," "indicators of effectiveness," and "deliverables." NGOs increasingly were assessed (by donors and the public and press) according to the ratio of their overheads to their field delivery costs (lower overheads are interpreted to represent greater "efficiency"), and by how they managed projects "on time and on budget." Colleagues report that, in NGO Board meetings, it is common for discussion to revolve around the identification of the one (or possibly two) indicators of success that will support that NGOs' "branding" in the public and donor domains, making the NGO increasingly "competitive" in the search for private and public funds.

Many aspects of the current international assistance system and structures now mirror approaches of businesses, emphasizing efficient delivery of goods and services (things and activities) to "clients." All of this is meant to reinforce the responsibility of operational agencies to "serve" people "on budget" and in a timely way. Timeliness is quite often interpreted as speed when the delivery is in relation to a humanitarian crisis, and as within a given timeframe (often just one or two years) when it is related to development or peacebuilding activities.

The motivation for these emphases is a good one. It is important to recognize that people around the world have rights to decent lives (hence, rights-based programming) and that they should be treated as "clients" who deserve to be well-served by our efforts. If we are not providing them with goods and services, then they should be able to choose another organization or "brand."

All of this was intended to correct the charity-oriented, help-the-"victim" approaches of the past and to ensure that resources went farther by reducing waste and overhead costs. The Listening Project has seen, from field evidence, that these efforts to improve the business model of international assistance efforts have, however, had important negative side-effects.

How Does This Affect International Assistance Efforts for People in Recipient Societies?

Many people with whom the Listening Teams have talked, both in recipient societies and in donor locations, comment that international assistance has become an "industry." Further, they note that the "aid industry" has focused on the efficient delivery of goods and services more than on building relationships. This is true for humanitarian and development efforts, certainly, but it is also surprisingly true of peace programming as well (when peacebuilding actors deliver training, skills workshops, dialogues, etc.). As one director of a local NGO said, describing the

changes he has seen in the last ten years, "Aid is a business, not a commitment." People talk about various aspects of the aid industry and the current "business model" and how these affect the impacts of international assistance efforts on local people.

Efficiency and Speed

A number of people in the international assistance system seem to equate efficiency with speed. This is especially true for agencies involved in humanitarian emergencies, but this attitude also affects donors and agencies involved in longer-term development work. Donors set short deadlines for submission of proposals and most NGOs claim to be able to accomplish ambitious project goals in short (often one- or two-year) funding cycles. However, there is strong evidence that speed does not represent efficiency in the delivery of goods and services when efficiency is (correctly) understood to mean the achievement of intended outcomes with minimum or reasonable inputs.

Listening Teams have heard many people suggest "slowing down" as one step toward improving the outcomes and impacts of assistance. Even people who have experienced rapid-onset emergencies often say that aid agencies should "go more slowly," "invest the necessary time" to "listen to people" in order to "learn about the real circumstances," and "get to know people."

A man in Thailand (among many others) connected speed of delivery with dependency, saying, "There was too much assistance too fast…international agencies should be slower in their distribution…By giving out so easily, you are turning them (people) into beggars."

Haste in planning and programming was also associated, in Listening Project conversations, with wasteful programming. A number of people said they had been asked by donors and NGOs to "come up with a plan in one month" so they "scrambled to put something together without longer reflection on what is needed for the longer term." The time-tables of projects (typically one, two or three years), the duration of donor funding (one to three or four years) and the common NGO "project cycle" are all geared to getting information quickly as a basis for designing and implementing "needed" activities. A spiritual leader in Thailand noted that, "People come from outside and do not spend time to get to know the community and the area. They see what is on the surface and (as a result) they only see problems." He, and others, saw this as wasteful because it often means that the wrong aid is delivered to the wrong people in the wrong way, however rapidly it is accomplished.

Many people said that they resent the disrespect for their ideas, abilities and concerns that they see coming from hurried work. They describe the mistakes that have been made in projects that could have been prevented with just a little more time spent in getting to know local realities. Taking time to plan, with local people, especially the intended recipients, beneficiaries and/or participants, "shows respect for people's ideas and opinions." They see the single-minded focus on speed as a programming choice that reinforces external dominance over internal concerns and circumstances.

Donors and aid agency staff also report that they feel pressured and hurried. Tight time-frames for proposals and pressures to spend funds quickly result in less time spent in communities. As

someone in Ethiopia said, "NGOs are often bound by rigid proposal submission deadlines set by donors and this hinders their ability to consult communities." Many aid workers talk sadly about the constant deadlines of reports they have to submit—both to their headquarters and to donors. Without enough time to visit and talk with community members in order to hear what they suggest for programming, aid workers submit both proposals and reports to meet deadlines to continue to get funding to do good programming. But, one rule of good programming—lasting and respectful relationships with the people with whom one is working—is obviated by the pressure of deadlines. Aid agencies and their staff often opt for "efficiency" as equated with speed, which gets funded, rather than for respectful relationships, which may not produce a proposal or a report on time.

All of this results in a delivery system in which opportunities and incentives for listening to local voices and ideas in open-ended ways are limited.

Efficiency and Costs

A number of people in a number of places who have been involved in Listening Project conversations have noted that the emphasis on improving the efficiency of aid delivery is one of the reasons that aid agency staff spend less time in communities (this is also discussed in the "*Listening in the Aid System*" Issue Paper). As noted above, an emphasis on speed is likely to reduce the time spent in exploring options with local communities, so mistakes get made that, with more local consultation, could have been avoided. But, efficiency concerns also have meant that certain activities are seen as unnecessarily costly.

Listening Teams have heard a great deal of feedback on specific project details, such as "the wrong people got the aid," "you have to know someone to get assistance," "the seeds arrived too late to plant," and so on. But, as people everywhere make these points, they consistently express concerns that seem to go deeper than programming flaws. They seem to feel left out of the processes of program design, decision-making, planning and implementation. A two-hour village meeting does not satisfy them as sufficiently "participatory." An after-the-fact evaluation of programming impacts does not satisfy their longing for real engagement or convince them that they have ways to hold aid providers accountable. (A continuing commentary on people's desire to see more of the staff of NGOs, to "have more presence" in their villages is more fully explored in the Issue Paper on *Presence: "Why Being Here Matters"*).

The point is that having more staff, especially international staff, on the ground who can take the time to sit and listen to people and ponder with them alternatives and options costs money. As noted above, cost-savings are considered one aspect of efficiency, and NGOs are ranked (and often lauded and rewarded) for a low overhead rate relative to expenditures on goods and services delivered to target communities.

People in and out of the aid system have noted to the Listening Project that the short time frame they regularly face in which to spend donor money often results in cutting corners (notably, community involvement) so that they can meet project reporting deadlines (often in order to submit another proposal for another project). People in recipient societies complained that donors and aid agencies often spend a lot of money on hotels and trainings in order to spend the

money they have quickly, especially when the funding is coming to a close. As the leader of a local NGO in Sri Lanka said, "We all know the good development principles like participation and conflict sensitivity, but in the rush of post-disaster relief, very few were able to uphold these principles because of requirements to spend money fast."

But according to many people that participate in listening conversations, to deliver the right things to the right people on the right schedule requires more time spent sitting, talking, considering, weighing and testing ideas. It involves spending more resources on staff time and on sufficient vehicles to take staff not only to near-by, but also to remote villages and to visit not once or twice but enough times, with enough frequency, to arrive at decisions that reflect and build on local capacities and thinking. Such expenditures do not "deliver" things. But, if they truly result in better programming that helps people move out of poverty, they would likely be more efficient than repeated, wrongly-designed and implemented projects.

Oddly, alongside NGO efforts to minimize overhead costs relative to project delivery costs, the aid "industry" also rewards growth, including growth in budgets. Increasing size is seen as an indicator of effectiveness. Both headquarters and field staff of international NGOs note that they are rewarded for getting proposals funded and for moving goods and services "on time and on budget." Field Directors are successively promoted if they are seen to manage their budgets well and, many people tell us, this entails raising and spending more in each successive financial year. Many aid agency staff say that these currently dominant incentive structures do not generally reward more time spent with communities, and that the indicators used to track their performance focus on outputs (number of proposals funded, number of people assisted, etc.) rather than on the quality of the relationships they build or the processes they use to achieve these goals.

Yet, efficient development assistance and, possibly, efficient humanitarian work, would by logic involve decreasing expenditures in the communities relative to project management. That is, as people in communities become able to manage more and more on their own, the actual delivery of things to these communities would drop even as NGO staff, serving as facilitators in the process or simply remaining involved as colleagues, might remain constant. Nonetheless, NGO Field Directors who do not show budget growth (even if they can report good outcomes or impacts) are often not promoted.

Government-based donor agencies also feel the pressure to spend the funds they have in the time they are allocated since they often receive their budgets on a yearly basis. If they find they have extra funds remaining at the end of the year, they fear they will face a reduction in allocations in subsequent years. As a result, donors increasingly expect operational NGOs and other recipient agencies to spend down allocated budgets entirely in the time of their grants and contracts, rather than end the year under budget or to ask for extra time to spend it more effectively. As a local NGO staff in Bosnia said, "Sometimes a good project wins but sometimes it is just necessary for donors to spend their money so they just give the money without caring at all about the project."

CDA's own experience is instructive. Whereas our own governmental donors formerly were pleased when we managed to conduct the projects we had proposed at lower than projected costs and they regularly agreed that we could roll-over the remaining funds from one project cycle to

the next, they now more often see this as a possible indication of a lapse in management and they more often repossess the balance of unexpended funds.

Two things that possibly could improve impacts are lost in this push to spend what has been allocated. First, there is strong field-based evidence that sometimes it is very important to delay a delivery of some good, because to deliver on the planned schedule will either put people at risk of violence, undermine a locally driven process, or in some other way weaken efforts made by local people to achieve security and development. Second, when a funding recipient must spend all its funding, incentives to encourage others to contribute their funds or efforts, to get local people to find cheaper options or ways to do things, to stay at local hotels and to use local vehicles (which may be low-cost) are undermined. If money must be spent, then aid workers will spend it – and in doing so, possibly fail to explore options for engaging local people in ways that could have been compatible with building good relationships and had beneficial developmental impacts.

Partnering as Outsourcing

Intending to support local institutions, many donors and international NGOs work with local, indigenous NGOs as "partners" in their programming. One outcome of this admirable trend, however, is that the aid system now has multiple layers and actors, with many more "middlemen" between the funders and the receivers of international assistance (see the "*Relationships in the Aid System*" Issue Paper for more discussion on this topic). People in recipient communities find this confusing and distancing—they often do not know who is really behind the assistance that they see in their communities and they do not, therefore, know who to hold accountable or how to do so.

In many, many Listening conversations, people urged that more aid go directly from donors to recipients, cutting out the "waste" and "bureaucratization" that has come with partnering. Capturing this sentiment heard many times in many different contexts, a leader of a women's group in Kenya asked, "Can aid come to the beneficiaries without going through many middlemen so that it reaches the people whole, the way it was given by the donor? For example, a new bottle of water is full, how best can it come down to the people without being opened on the way?" She concluded, "Let aid come to the grassroots!" In a number of countries, Listening Teams heard people compare the delivery chain of aid to a water bottle, out of which everyone along the way takes a drink so that by the time the aid reaches the communities it was intended to help, there is very little "water" left.

While the increased reliance on local organizations as intermediaries is intended to increase local capacities and is generally seen as a good thing, many people in recipient societies are concerned that this results in reduced oversight and accountability to the communities that are supposed to be helped. We have heard many complaints that subcontracting and outsourcing assistance by international NGOs, contractors and donors has resulted in "wallet" or "briefcase" NGOs who do not do the work they are intended to do and who waste valuable resources.

As the leader of a CBO in Sri Lanka said, "Sri Lankan national NGOs based in Colombo often claim a broad-based support and a country-wide network or grassroots movement… But in

reality, just like the foreign NGOs, the national NGOs based in Colombo rarely come out here and listen to our priorities and goals. They call us in the middle of the night asking to bus people into Colombo for yet another rally so that they can show their 'grassroots numbers' but our people don't feel listened to… you are missing out on the true voice of the grassroots communities by relying on the intermediaries. Come and listen to us, understand our daily reality and our development priorities."

People urged that aid agencies "be careful who they work with" and monitor more frequently to be sure that the resources are really reaching those whom they intend to help. (Again, staffing to do this would add to overhead costs.) As a staff member of a local organization in Kenya said, "International NGOs should have officials on the ground and get rid of the many 'middlemen' that have characterized the NGO fraternity...There should be provision of aid in a transparent and efficient manner without involving middlemen. Assistance should be decentralized so that it is closer to the people who need it."

This outsourcing of assistance has also reduced the time spent in the field by donors and international aid agencies. People in many places expressed frustration that donors are far removed from the assistance process, seem unfamiliar with specific projects, and do not bother to come to communities to see how their money has been spent and whether it matched people's needs. In Kosovo as in many other places, Listening Teams heard people question over and over again, "Why didn't anyone come back? Why didn't they come and see how the money was being spent, the quality of the materials used, and who was getting them?"

The President of a prominent national NGO in Thailand suggested, "The role of the 'donor' does not have to be a detached funding role. It can be a partnership...unfortunately international NGOs don't build capacity of national NGOs. Even when they work through local partners, the local NGOs simply becomes a delivery mechanism, not a full partner. Partnership requires building relationships. That takes time. But most international NGOs have donors who demand fast and visible results. There is a disconnect in the way most agencies envision their missions and goals and the way they implement their projects seeking rapid outcomes."

Packaging and Branding of Assistance

Many NGOs talk about "branding." They work to differentiate themselves from other NGOs that work in the same field in order to attract more donors and more funds. Donors, for their part, put out RFAs and RFPs that, in essence, pit NGOs against each other as competitors. The current delivery system business model quite naturally translates into competition rather than collaboration, cooperation, mutual appreciation and shared primary concern for effectiveness with people on the recipient side of these processes. At the same time, many people in recipient societies note that they "have no chance to choose which organization works in our community." The competitive model that is pursued by donors and aid agencies does not translate into a free-market for aid recipients who can choose the "brand" that they find works best for them. (See discussion of accountability below.)

People in recipient societies say their experience is that, even as local NGOs compete for funds and media attention, many international NGOs and donors operate in quite similar ways. The

space for creativity and innovation seems to be circumscribed by the necessity to respond according to prescribed criteria and on short time frames. The more the international assistance community coordinates their approaches at the donor/headquarters levels, the fewer the degrees of freedom for locally-based innovative activities that exist. For instance, as donors and INGOs learn from experience and codify their improved understandings of aid effectiveness into policies and "best practices," many lose a focus on balancing these with the necessity of learning from local contexts.

Listening Teams have heard many people express their anger at the arrogance of outsiders who bring "pre-packaged" assistance. They resent international "targets," "standards" or "coordination mechanisms" that ignore local context and realities. Many speak of the programming mold that is set by pre-determined needs, set in categories that they feel are inappropriate in their societies, and biased in their assumptions about what works. They resent receiving program designs that have been developed for different societies. Some use the word "insulted" to describe how they feel when aid agencies bring pre-packaged approaches and projects that have supposedly worked elsewhere. One person in Zimbabwe said, "Aid that is provided should not be like one large blanket covering different people. It should not be the same for all. It should take into account differences between people and households and be tailored to our needs. Aid given in that way is more dignified."

Many people involved in Listening conversations have also talked about what they see as a lack of donor flexibility, noting when projects need to slow down or change mid-stream, implementers do not have flexibility to respond to change. Again, they see this as often related to the "pre-packaging" and the short-term funding available. As a local staff member of an international NGO in Kenya said, "Aid with prescriptive guidelines may not work in 'X' like in other areas—they will take the funding and do projects to 'bless the donor' but there are often no results at the end of the day. Some projects have too short a time frame to implement and so we jump steps so that we can report back to donors. The quick reporting deadlines challenge communities' own schedules for harvesting and other events." This quotation also notes that important steps that could result in more effective programming are skipped, because to take the time to follow them would raise costs.

Results-Based Management

As part of the aid community's exploration of the benefits of a business-type model to improve efficiency, we have seen increasing use of business terminology and approaches. One example is the wide-spread use by donors and by NGO headquarters of the term "results-based management," often emphasizing the use of standardized logical frameworks and indicators.

The focus on results is welcomed by people in many communities. The Listening Teams hear this again and again. However, the teams also hear a number of people criticize the kinds of indicators that are commonly applied to identify "results" in results-based management systems.

A common example, often cited by people in recipient societies, has to do with counting the number of people trained in a workshop, or the number of children who go to school. The indicators do not instead ask whether the people in the workshop ever use their training and, if

so, whether it has some positive effects. They do not ask whether the children stay in school, graduate and go on for further education or found employment which utilized the knowledge and skills gained during their schooling.

The point they are making is that, too often in their experience, results-based management systems result in reporting on projects and activities against pre-determined targets or indicators that do not measure success in the ways aid recipients would.

Again, with a focus on delivering goods or services, many of the top-down, donor-driven logical frameworks focus on the efficiency of projects and their costs—outputs—instead of long-term impacts of assistance. As a Buddhist monk who runs a local NGO in Sri Lanka said, "NGOs say in their MOUs what the indicators are. They say if we want their money, we have to take the project as is, so only we know our sadness. Indicators such as elderly women, widows, are foreign indicators given to us by outsiders. We should be able to identify some indicators ourselves—perhaps 25%. Allow us the flexibility to develop our indicators. It has to come from us, not be top down…We accept their conditions because we value the aid more than getting over the restrictions."

These indicators usually focus on tangibles that can be measured. However, people have said over and over that "how" agencies provide assistance, and the relationships they make in that process, are often more important to them than "what" agencies provide. Most do not distinguish the "what" from the how; many describe how a good process is intrinsic to good results. Since it is difficult to specify, quantify or track (in ways that are specifically attributable) the intangibles (or even long-term tangibles) that are also results of assistance, most results-based management approaches acknowledge their importance, but do little to include them in their monitoring and evaluation systems.

Discussing how to assess results, a priest in Sri Lanka said, "All of us, people and organizations who want to support people's development and improve their situation, tend to come from 'above' and do a lot of 'patch-up work' in these communities. Our small projects are easily managed and we can see project objectives in a short span of time. But the development of the people requires attention to the underlying issues as well which requires change in attitudes, creativity and empowerment. The work to build these values and strengths takes so much longer and can't easily be reported in our reports."

Accountability

As aid agencies have adopted aspects of business language and approaches, some have begun calling the people they serve "clients" in order to affirm their right to assess what is offered in the same way that buyers of products evaluate and choose among different market offerings.

However, most agencies still pay far more attention to (and invest more resources in) being accountable to their donors (private and public), than to the recipients or so-called clients of their efforts. Local people know that agencies provide reports to donors, but many question why they do not get to see these reports, why many donors do not check whether the reports are true, or whether the assistance provided has made a positive difference in recipients' lives. As one

beneficiary in Kosovo, critical of how aid monies had been used, said, "When internationals bring their money here, they should be careful where they spend it and who they give it to. They need more internal controlling…I have no power. I have no access to the municipality and no way to examine financial records."

While some agencies use the language of "clients," people on the recipient end of assistance tell us that they do not get to select the agencies that work in their communities. Even more important, they say that they seldom have any way to hold the agencies accountable when the work is badly done or when it does harm. Most people do not identify themselves as "clients" because, they say, they have no power to hold aid agencies accountable. In Bosnia as in other places, people in communities and the government asked, "who controls all these NGOs?," "who supervises them?" and "to whom are they accountable?"

Following the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia, many donors and aid agencies produced glossy accountability reports which were widely distributed. However, very few people in the communities that received assistance say that they ever saw these reports or had the opportunity to question (or agree or disagree) with them. The reporting gap is seen as a real problem by local people who feel as if the reporting to donors signals the priorities of NGOs – and that it is not to the local people, even if the agencies marketing materials say so!

Some people noted that donor procedures are very difficult and complicated, and that they need to be simplified for communities and organizations to better understand and to play a role in improving accountability. A woman in Kenya said "If I have never handled a thousand, how can you expect me to handle 10,000?" Some suggested that people need to be better prepared to receive funding and be supported with training and mentoring in order to be able to hold aid providers accountable.

Others, however, suggested that NGOs and staff need training on how to be more transparent and accountable. A farmer in Sri Lanka suggested, "Monetary figures from INGOs should be more transparent along with the bill of quantities. The community has a right to look at those and if it sees problems, it should be able to question the figures." But several aid workers noted that even within aid agencies, local staff often do not know what their budgets are and may not be able to answer the communities' questions.

When asked why people do not complain more, people said things such as "Communities do not openly criticize or publicly denounce the vice of funds mismanagement by NGOs for fear of being targeted by the owners (of the funds) or losing out on the small support they get." Others said that because they do not have any information from donors and agencies on what they should expect, it is difficult to hold agencies accountable. People also said they do not know where to complain. This is especially the case when agencies have left the area or the country. Several people told of sincere attempts to complain and their frustration when they arrived at an NGO office and no one would talk with them or listen to them, or when they called a number they had been given by an aid agency and found it had been disconnected. Some people suggested that their communities have given up and do not bother because they do not want to question those who provide aid.

Why is this important?

Although the references to a more efficient delivery system as an approach to international assistance is intended to signal respect for aid recipients and to afford them more power, the aid "industry" appears to be more supply-driven rather than demand-driven in its systems, structures, and methods. The environment in which international humanitarian assistance and development takes place has changed tremendously, so why hasn't the aid industry adapted and evolved in order to deliver better results?

What the Listening Project hears in the comments about slowing down, about re-thinking priorities, and about transparency and accountability is a call, by people in many locations, for the assistance agency staff (both local and international) to take the time to be colleagues and friends. We hear an emphasis on process as much as results, and a reminder that process is intrinsic to results. The implications for how international assistance agencies define their goals and processes are profound.

One explanation for why, in each setting where the agencies collaborating with the Listening Project have had difficulties finding the time and resources to devote to this effort, is precisely because the forms of organization, staff evaluation and incentives and methods of setting priorities do not, at this juncture in aid history, have much (sufficient!) space in them for engaging with the people (individuals and communities) that live in the places where we work. Although the delivery of things to people in need, and of ideas and training and other intangibles to people who are eager to find options and develop further, is the focus of international assistance efforts, the "how" of delivery shapes the impacts as much as what is delivered. To put the resources (time and money) into this aspect of assistance may require a significant adjustment in donor, NGO headquarters and field-based thinking, processes and follow-through.

Further Questions for exploration

- In what ways do the incentive structures in the aid system need to change in order to address these concerns?
- Do aid recipients have experience with any participatory evaluation and accountability mechanisms which have been effective and satisfactory, and if so, how did they work?
- What kinds of evidence do donors require (or could they require) that the projects they fund are appreciated by and truly make a difference in the lives of those they are intending to help?
- How do donors (public and private) evaluate their 'return on investment' in aid efforts and are they the right measures according to aid recipients? What other indicators would communities recommend to measure long-term success and good results?
- Why do managers, projects and aid agencies that fail to deliver good results for those they are intending to help continue to get funded? How could they be held more accountable in the aid marketplace?