



LISTENING PROJECT

Field Visit Report

Aceh, Indonesia, November 2005

This field visit report is one of a series of reports developed as part of the Listening Project (LP), directed by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. The LP reports were not written as evaluations; rather, they were written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across the range of reports. This report is not intended for citation or publication. It is not a final product of the Listening Project.

Introduction/Background

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), with a number of colleagues in international NGOs and other international humanitarian and development agencies, has started a new 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, as this effort is called, seeks the insights of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies. These individuals are well-placed to assess the impacts of aid efforts by international actors. Those of us who work across borders in humanitarian assistance, development assistance and/or peace efforts, can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and judgments of these local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term outcomes of such international efforts.

Over the next two years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty countries. In each, teams of international assistance workers and local NGO staff will engage a range of people in conversations about the impacts of international assistance. The project will gather what we hear from people as they reflect on and analyze the implications of international assistance for their societies in order to integrate these insights into future work and, thereby, to improve its effectiveness.

The Listening Project in Aceh

The Listening Project (LP) began with a two-week field effort in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh), Indonesia in November 2005. The International Rescue Committee, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and Mercy Corps collaborated with CDA in arranging for, and carrying out, the first field visit of the Listening Project in Aceh. Each of these agencies provided funds, staff and other supports (hospitality, transport, etc.) to the effort. CDA sent three staff people to take part in this inaugural field visit.

The LP teams did not work from pre-set questions or an interview protocol. Rather we told people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, we were interested to hear from them how they saw these efforts. We asked if they would be willing to spend some time with us, telling us their opinions and ideas. In this way, we opened conversations on the issues of concern, without pre-judging the exact topics and directions. We wanted people with whom we spoke to take the lead in raising the issues that most concern them.

Seven teams of “listeners,” each composed of one Indonesian staff person and one international staff person, visited three areas of Aceh – in and around Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar, in and around Calang, and in and around Meulaboh. Some conversations were carried out with one or two individuals; others involved larger groups (from four to eight people) who gathered around to talk as our conversations proceeded.

In most cases, conversations were not pre-arranged. An LP team would arrive in a village and strike up a conversation with whomever was available and willing to talk. In many cases, the LP teams would begin with a visit with the Head of Village or Coordinator of a Temporary Living

Centre, both to engage him/her in conversation about the impacts of assistance and to ask permission to talk with other people. Conversations included a range of people, some of whom had been direct recipients of international aid and some of whom had not. Often, teams would stop in a tea shop and talk with people there; sometimes, they would sit with a woman or two at work in a shop or at their homes preparing food. Villagers often would invite a team to come into their home to talk. We took whatever opportunities presented themselves and appreciated the willingness and openness of many people to sit and reflect with us on their observations.

In order to expand the range of people to whom we listened, we made appointments to talk with a University professor, a businessman and government officials. At the University in Banda Aceh, we also talked with students whom we met on campus and at the Student Center.

In the three locations and over the five days, the listening teams held conversations of varying length and depth with over three-hundred people. The conversations included older people and youth; officials and citizens; men and women; people in urban areas and in rural areas; direct tsunami and/or conflict victims and people not directly affected; people who had received a great deal of assistance and people who had not; people who held leadership positions and those who felt marginalized.

Despite our efforts to reach a broad range of people, we are aware that what we heard represents a small fraction of the opinions and judgments of Acehnese people. We therefore do not draw broad conclusions from this first field activity. Rather, over the coming months, as we listen in many more locations, we will look for common themes, attitudes, conclusions and judgments that may be helpful to future international work and improve its impacts. At the end of each section, below, we do reflect on some of the questions that are raised by what we heard that seem to deserve more listening and analysis.

A Note on the Context in Aceh

For humanitarian workers, Aceh had certain unusual characteristics that affected their work and what the Listening Project heard from people there. Among salient factors that influenced responses to the Listening Project were: a) Because the region had been virtually closed to outsiders for some time (due to a thirty-year conflict), there was not a long history of international assistance, nor the expectations this often creates; b) The tsunami, among all other so-called natural disasters we have seen, was the least “political,” in that the effects of the disaster were due to the forces of nature (earthquake, wave and flood), rather than political decisions that determined who lived where; and c) The immediate needs of people were obvious and relatively unambiguous in the first weeks and months after the tsunami.

Additionally, as one local Listening Team member noted, historically the Aceh coast had been a center for international trade and, as a consequence, had been settled by groups from the Middle East and India. This early cosmopolitanism coupled with growing mistrust of the central government of Indonesia exacerbated by the years of conflict, may have predisposed Acehnese to be welcoming to the foreign community who arrived after the tsunami.

By the time of the visit of the Listening Project eleven months after the major earthquake/tsunami, the immediate emergency needs of rescue, medical care, food, water and temporary shelter had been provided to all affected people for some time. These conditions shaped the background against which people raised the issues and themes they considered important at this time.

What We Heard

I. On Distribution:

Virtually everyone with whom we spoke had opinions about what was/is being distributed and the processes and systems of distribution. Almost all echoed the comment, “We think international assistance is good and we appreciate it.” Once this was said, many followed with “but...” and then commented more analytically on issues that concerned them. The comments and ideas can be sorted into three main headings (with some inevitable overlap): a) *What* is distributed, b) *To whom* things are distributed and c) *How* distribution occurs.

On What is distributed:

Some people described problems in the delivery of emergency aid, such as inadequate assessment of needs leading to haphazard and uneven access. However, many agreed that, “At the beginning, assistance was the right things at the right times.” However, many also pointed out that the “emergency is past and the needs have changed.”

For example, some people noted that they never liked canned fish and that even if it made sense to distribute this in the emergency phase, it no longer does. Fishermen are now active and, if people begin again to buy fresh fish, this will help restart the fishery economy. One woman described in detail her many attempts to cook canned fish so it was palatable for her family – she confessed that she never succeeded and ended up having to throw it away. A number of people told of selling their tins of fish to get cash.

Further, many named other items frequently distributed that they did not need or want. This included cooking kits (some people received several of these) and “tissues” that they were “sure were useful” but they did not “know how to use.” A number noted that NGOs should “not give small things that people can get for themselves” (such as spices or cooking pots). One noted that, “It seems as if the NGOs need to empty their warehouses.”

People talked of things they received that were not usable. Examples included: seeds that came too late for planting or that were expired so they did not germinate; a pipe that was laid without any hook-up to a water source (supposed to be done by “another NGO that never came”); boats but no nets or other fishing equipment; a generator given when there is no fuel or access to fuel. One area of particular distress had to do with water quality in newly built (or refurbished) wells. A number of people said they “did not use” these wells because “the water has a bad smell” or “is dirty.”

Many people noted that “You give us all the same things, but we are not all the same.” One woman made this point saying: “One man may like noodles; another may like a fish.” The importance of recognizing that different people have different needs or wants came up particularly in relation to housing (see below under Priorities) where there was some dismay over the construction of permanent houses that all have exactly the same floor plan and design. We saw many examples where people, living in identical barracks, had individualized their own space by creating a small patio or by planting a flower.

Listening Project Reflections on What is Distributed

Several issues stand out as deserving further attention/analysis.

All NGOs know that they should not distribute things that people do not want or use. Supply-driven aid always creates frustrations and misses the mark of real need. The question for the international community is how are we finally going to change this.

Equally important but more often overlooked is the evidence that some good things that are distributed that are needed (such as fishing boats or water pipes) are useless unless they are accompanied by the other items that make them effective (fishing equipment or linkage to a water source, etc.). Compartmentalization among NGOs can lead to gaps that undermine the usefulness of such items.

A question raised by people in Aceh that is ripe for further exploration is how does the delivery of the same things to everyone, in spite of differences among them, affect recipients’ sense of dignity. Is dignity, in part, realized through recognition of differences in tastes and wants?

On Priorities: Housing v Livelihoods:

There was a great deal of discussion about what kind of aid people most want or feel they need now (as opposed to the emergency phase).

A significant majority of people named livelihood support – as compared to permanent housing – as their top priority. A few named water as their top priority.

One Listening Team found that, to a great extent, the smaller number of people who preferred housing over livelihoods fell into three categories: 1) older people or others who for some reason would be unlikely to work (depending on family or government support plus, perhaps, a kitchen garden); 2) people who already had started their livelihood and, therefore, thought that if houses were being given out, they might as well get one and 3) people who associated getting settled in a house with the ability to start a livelihood activity (such as someone who planned to construct a small shop, or a tea house, onto the front of their house). Others regularly noted that, if they got their livelihoods started again, they could/would build their own houses. Many had already done so – borrowing money from banks, friends, or in some other way getting the resources together to build sufficient housing to go forward.

Many (most?) NGOs have plans to spend a large amount of the sizable funds they have raised on building permanent housing. In virtually every village we visited, people told us of future permanent houses or showed us the floor plans or a “model” house, that had been proposed by an NGO. Many people reported that NGOs had made promises (see section on Expectations below) to provide permanent housing – and some people were, therefore, waiting for this to occur rather than building their own house. “Getting a house is better than building it yourself” was said by a few people. Others felt strongly that building it themselves was preferable.

People did note that it is important for NGOs to supply some housing, or provide some support, because “not everyone can build their own.”

There were many complaints about the designs and construction of houses that were being built. These included: “too small;” “no latrine/sanitation;” “no kitchen;” “no electricity; and “no porch” (it appears that many Acehnese feel that a porch is an essential part of a home).

Many instances were reported (and shown) where housing construction was poor. Some were already falling down; some were being used as storage for rice rather than lived in because “they were so bad.”

A number of people made the link between housing construction and livelihoods, noting that, if NGOs hire local people as carpenters and/or brick makers, then they can pursue both a housing and livelihood strategy. However, many reported that NGO hiring of carpenters so far favored “outsiders” over local people who had suffered from the tsunami. If NGOs could not make the link to provide support for local livelihoods through hiring local people to build houses, many seemed to conclude that they preferred help with their own livelihoods over help with housing. One spoke for many when he said, “We don’t need aid, we need capital.”

Finally, some people strongly emphasized the importance of getting the roads rebuilt (to enable trade and travel, to enable imports of building supplies at lower prices) and of supporting the re-establishment of a fisheries industry through ice factories, fish processing, etc.

Listening Project Reflections on Priorities: Housing v Livelihoods:

LP teams were concerned by the evidence that most NGOs had extensive plans to construct permanent housing for all tsunami victims, while the majority of people with whom we spoke were ready and willing to build their own houses if only they could have some livelihood support. In fact, most preferred to rebuild their own houses (with the exceptions noted in the text above).

Also of interest for further exploration was the emphasis some put on re-establishment of infrastructure. Clearly, it is possible for one family to rebuild its own home, but not for an individual to rebuild a road (or, for most, a fish processing plant). Given the sizable funds that most NGOs have to work with in Aceh, the question arises as to whether these would be better spent if focused on re-building infrastructure that is beyond the capabilities of individuals to build.

*On **Who** receives help:*

Many, many people commented that the systems of distribution are “not fair.” One said, “We know there should be priorities (often named by villagers as “weak and widows” or “poor and alone” or “those who lost the most”), but the 10th priority gets things while the 1st do not.”

Many – perhaps more than half of all the people we spoke with – commented that “what you receive, when you receive it, or how much you get depends on who you know.” There was a widespread sense that being connected to someone who had control over the allocations was a great advantage. In some (fewer) cases, people reported that such connections meant that people who were not affected by the tsunami got things when those who had been affected did not.

People regularly used such words as “corruption” and “nepotism” to describe their sense of how the distribution of aid occurs. One person said that “whoever gives the things perhaps takes some for himself.” People most often referred to corruption or diversion of goods by Heads of Villages or other governmental authorities. Some also said that the local staff of international NGOs tend to favor friends or relatives. A number of people noted that international NGOs should take responsibility for helping to change this pattern that has existed for a long time in Aceh. They were disappointed that, rather than trying to change this, the NGOs had simply gone along with it.

Some emphasized the responsibility of international NGOs by noting that local staff were “not to blame because they are not professional, they have not been trained” by their employers. Others said that international NGOs should train local staff “in humanitarian principles.”

People discussed their awareness of differences:

Many people noted that everyone does not get the same things. Quite often, people were extremely specific about what others had received, as it compared to what they had received. Their knowledge of what had been distributed, even in distant locations, seemed very precise. They took the time and trouble to find out what others got. For some, this mattered a great deal; for others, it did not matter so much.

People discussed fairness:

With awareness of the differences in what people receive, and with accusations of corruption and nepotism, there was much discussion of other ways of providing aid that would be more equitable and fair.

Some people said, “If there is not enough for everyone to receive the same amount, then it is better if NGOs do not give anything to anyone.” Others said, “Small aid is better than big aid which is uneven.”

Others said, “It does not matter that some people get more than we do; something is better than nothing.” Some said that if there is unfairness, “God will take care of it” – that is, that they do not feel it is their place to hold people accountable; people who do not act correctly “will suffer for it in their own minds.”

People offered suggestions for fairness:

Many people had ideas for how to improve the fairness of distributions.

- A large number of people said that the way to solve the problems of corruption and nepotism was for international staff of NGOs to visit the areas where aid is given more often and to provide the aid directly to the people rather than going through others such as the Head of Village. This suggestion had two components: 1) that if international staff were face-to-face with recipients more often, they would be able to quickly correct mistakes that were made in distribution and 2) that international staff should not so easily trust that local authorities and representatives can see to fair distribution without more supervision.
- Some people related instances when decisions on distribution were made by lottery. They thought this was fair.

*Other factors and comments regarding **Who** gets aid:*

People made a number of comments on the criteria used by international NGOs to determine beneficiaries. These included:

- All aid “is focused on the beach” and not given to people who live away from the shore but who also suffered.

- Houses are being reconstructed only for people who owned houses before. Boats are given to those who owned boats before. This leaves out some important categories of people. For example, for people who rented rooms before, if the new housing that is provided (or even those built by people themselves) are smaller than those they had before, and they often are, then there will not be rental space available. Another example we found involved young couples who had lived with their parents before the tsunami. Now, with a smaller house, there would not be room for them again. They did not qualify for new housing.
- In one area, people told us that houses were being built by one NGO on the foundations of all the houses that had been destroyed. However, because the entire families who lived in some of these locations had been killed, these houses could not be occupied. This is because legally no one can move onto the land of another person until after nineteen years (during which other family members could come forward to claim the land).
- Poor people who are not designated as tsunami victims are, in general, not included in NGO programs. In some instances this has created resentments. Others noted that, although they too had suffered from displacement, loss of homes, and lack of employment for many years, victims of the conflict had received little or nothing from aid agencies.

Listening Project Reflections on Issues of Who Receives Aid:

One of the Listening teams, in their analysis of what lay behind the comments on fairness, noted that people seem to be more concerned about fairness in the quality of aid received, than about fairness in the quantity received. That is, they did not mind so much if some got more and others less – in this, they are realistic and pragmatic about the difficulties of allocating everything completely equally and they recognize that different people have different needs and wants. But, they do care that the goods some receive are of much higher quality than those that others get. One example that came up a number of times had to do with permanent shelter, where people were disturbed that some houses are built without a kitchen or latrine while others have these amenities. In this, there seems to be a widespread feeling that, if every new house cannot have these things, then it would be preferable if no house has them.

There was widespread disappointment that international NGOs had not reversed the systems of nepotism and corruption. Many people saw this as a missed opportunity. A question to be explored is to what extent could a larger international presence, and/or more direct training and supervision of processes, help ameliorate these problems? Would the costs this involves be justified by the larger impacts of perceived fairness?

Finally, the specifications of who could receive aid in Aceh clearly meant that some people were falling through the cracks (such as renters, young couples for whom there would not be space in new houses, and conflict victims). The question for further explored is: How we can identify, early enough, such gaps in distribution systems, so that we can develop timely and cost-effective programs to address them? Or, alternatively, should one NGO take on the job, specifically, of

identifying those who are left out of usual systems and following up with appropriate programs for them?

II. On Information and Communication

People discussed communication from NGOs to the communities:

A large number of people expressed their dismay that they did not have enough information about aid and aid processes. “I do not want to blame anyone; I just want information,” said one man as he commented on problems with aid distributions. Another said, “If people are getting different aid, they need to know why.” Others said: “If we understand, then we can be patient.” “They gave our village ten boats. But why ten boats? It just seemed arbitrary.” “I do not know the system of aid, and cannot read and write, so I cannot get help.” “The process of receiving aid is not clear to the beneficiaries.” “How aid works is confusing.”

When we asked questions of fact, we often got responses such as: “I don’t know, but perhaps the Head of Village knows.” Or, “perhaps my husband knows.” Some women noted that NGOs always talk to men but not so much to women, whereas other women seemed very involved and vocal and men referred to them as the source of knowledge.

Other people noted that they had some, but limited, information. For some, this meant they felt they did not have, or understand, options. They could either accept or reject what was offered, but had no way of choosing among alternatives.

Because people do not feel informed, they often cited rumors that they had heard. “We heard this, but we are not sure.” Some noted that they get their information from other villages, rather than from the NGOs. Others noted that, although the NGOs do visit their villages often, “if seems they do so just to cross it off their list.”

Very often, lack of information was related to failures or unfairness in distribution of aid. Most often cited was the frequency with which aid delivery times were changed, but because they were not informed of the new schedule, people who were away from the village at that time missed out.

The Listening teams found wide variation as to how much people knew about specific NGOs (as compared to what they knew about the processes by which aid decisions are made which few seemed to understand). Some did not know the names of any NGO that had visited them, and even were not aware of the particular NGO whose name was posted on various things (such as the entry to the barracks or on a water tank). Others, often in some positions of power (such as Head of Village), could discuss in detail the names and offerings of multiple NGOs.

People discussed communication from People to NGOs:

Many people noted that they did not have any way to express their opinions to or discuss problems with the NGOs. Very many noted that they were “afraid” to tell NGOs when things were not going well “because we might lose the aid we get.” A few women said that their husbands were “afraid” to complain to NGOs so that they had to do it in order to get what they needed. Some reported that they had told the NGO drivers of their problems but never got any response which, they thought, meant that the drivers had not passed the word along. Some said that “reporting corruption to the Head of Village or anyone else can have bad consequences” because in one instance they knew of, the police had beat people who complained. (There was some information, however, that this kind of action had lessened as stress levels of soldiers and police have reduced as hostilities between the government and GAM were ended.)

One group reported that an NGO had come to their village and held a meeting in which they could provide feedback. They had liked this a lot, but after the meeting, they never got any response to the issues they had raised. Others said that one NGO had put a suggestion box in their village but, again, when they had made suggestions, they never had any response.

People offered suggestions for improving communication:

A few people made suggestions for how to change this communication difficulty.

- Some wanted to have suggestion boxes in their villages.
- Some wanted to have more public meetings in which NGOs explained their ideas, presented options and then people decided how to proceed. A few also suggested that the actual pay out to people for work, or the distribution of goods, be done in public meetings in front of everyone.
- Some wanted the establishment of an information center where they could go when they felt they needed to know, or understand, something specific.

Listening Project Reflections on Information and Communications

Notable was the failure of NGOs to communicate effectively according to the people with whom we spoke. It will be interesting to explore options for ways of communicating that reach broader numbers and types of people. One factor that seemed to emerge in many settings was the likely expectation on the part of the NGOs that, by communicating with a village leader they were communicating with the village as a whole. This clearly did not work, in that there appeared to be a number of information blockages (from Village Heads to other people, from husbands to wives or vice versa, etc.)

Other issues of importance were that so many people felt “afraid” to raise issues with NGOs and, when people had raised problems, they felt there had been no effective follow through.

Finally, it seemed as if some international NGOs, wanting to be “culturally sensitive” in an Islamic society assumed that male staff workers could not speak directly to women. Overall, we found that women were very willing to speak to men in our listening teams and both local and international staff who know Aceh well point out that, possibly compared to other Islamic cultures, there is a very high level of openness between men and women in public in Aceh. If women do not feel comfortable talking with a man, they express this very directly. In general, such public conversations are quite acceptable and accepted.

III. On Expectations and “Promises”

One of the most frequent themes raised in the conversations by local people had to do with the “promises” of NGOs.

Many said that the NGOs make many promises that they do not keep. One man told the story of having been promised credit three separate times but, so far, “the only thing I have gotten is a bucket!” One said, “I am very sad about the lack of follow-through on promises.” One said, “We would prefer to eat poison than promises.” Others referred to a popular song that has the lyric “Promises, promises, all we are left with is promises” as the way they see the work of NGOs.

One group described how an NGO had come and “collected information and took pictures” but never came back. Another man told how an NGO had come and “filled out forms” but never returned. He actually had gotten a business card from this group and so went to their office to find out what they intended. When he got there, no one would meet with him. He reported that “no one had any time for me or any interest.” Another group reported that an NGO had promised to provide certain assistance but not returned. They had therefore telephoned the office to find out what happened but found the telephone had been disconnected. They also had visited the office site and found it was no longer there.

When NGOs had come and taken data or pictures, or held village meetings to discuss possible projects, this was interpreted by people as a commitment to work with them. Specifically, we found that many people talked about having been asked by NGOs to submit proposals for something and, then, being disappointed when the proposal did not get funding. This they also interpreted this as a broken promise. One women said that, since she cannot read or write, she had hired someone to write a proposal for her but, so far, had had no response. Others talked about how NGOs invite proposals and never get back to them. A man told us that “writing proposals is too much work; most of my friends who have written proposals have been rejected.” Some referred to “proposal fatigue.”

Reactions to this sense of disappointed expectations varied. Some responded with the sardonic reference to the popular song noted above. One said, “You cannot hurry the NGOs.” A number of people shrugged and said, “who cares?” Some said they became tired of waiting and simply went ahead on their own (e.g., borrowed money to build their own house, set up their own livelihood, etc.).

Some indicated that these “broken promises mean that I do not trust international NGOs and my trust in going down.” One said, “Don’t give us sadness.” In one area, village people had

assaulted an NGO worker because they were so angry with the failure to follow through on commitments. Another person said, “If he did not work for an NGO, I would kill him” about a representative who had not performed as expected.

One person made a link to the peace process that is of concern. He noted that the GAM had become powerful as a result of many broken promises by the Indonesian government. He felt that a widespread sense that other powers, such as the NGOs, had broken promises could, possibly, be used to promote social and political discontent at some point in the future.

Listening Project Reflections on Expectations and Promises:

As we tried to understand this high level of disappointment with what people perceived as failed promises, we found that many people referred to expectations they had developed as a result of some interactions with NGOs. But, it is likely that the NGOs perceived these interactions as exploratory, important to making good programmatic decisions, rather than as making a promise.

Again, the issue seems to be more of a problem of effective communications than of actual failure to do something that genuinely was promised. The costs of being seen to break a promise were, however, apparently very high.

V. On Impacts of the International Presence:

Many people commented on how foreigners were affecting life in Aceh. One person said, “I used to hate Americans because they invaded Iraq during the Gulf War. I loved Saddam Hussein at that time. But now, I like them, because of the work of US NGOs in our village. This is the blessing of the tsunami.”

Another woman said, “All my life I have dreamed of talking with someone like you. Before the tsunami, the government of Indonesia did not pay very much attention to Aceh. Now, since so many foreigners have come here, Aceh is a little famous and people have to pay attention.”

Another: “I have always wanted foreigners in Aceh.” Another: “Before I thought that international assistance was all about converting people to another religion. But now I see that this is not the case for all international assistance. The tsunami has helped us think differently.” Another: “Now that many foreign journalists are in Aceh, the people receive the real news.”

Some who were not, themselves, victims of the tsunami noted that, if the international assistance had not come, they (other Indonesians) would have been pressed to provide more to tsunami victims and, while they were happy to do this in the emergency days, it would become quite difficult for them to continue to help over the long run.

Some connected the international presence to the progress between the Indonesian government and the GAM in achieving a Memorandum of Understanding. One person said, “The international presence creates a pitch for peace.” (“Pitch” refers to a playing field, as in a soccer pitch.) Others noted that the MOU was “in part, possible, because of the international presence” and that “the international presence supports peace.” Many spoke of the improvement in their

circumstances that has come about as a result of the MOU and its resultant cessation in violence. They were able to move back to villages from which they had evacuated; those who had helped house IDPs were often pleased to have them be able to move back to their own homes; some were looking forward to resuming working on crops that could only be grown in the hills which, with the conflict, they could not reach.

Not all comments were so positive. One person noted, "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." Some worried that international NGOs would try to convert children (and others) to Christianity. Some had heard rumors of this, but only one person with whom the LP teams spoke had actually had an experience which he could cite as showing this to be a danger. One person said that "some [international NGOs] want to do it all themselves; they want to use their own methodology." Another asked: "Is it just white people who can help?" And another said, "Because the first aid came from outside, some people think that foreigners are superior." One worried that "foreigners might start a war or take over."

One of the most serious concerns about the international NGOs was related to the failures of communication and sense of unfulfilled promises discussed above. Some people said that they thought that the "NGOs are selling Indonesia" by coming to villages, collecting data and "providing this data to donors in exchange for funding." They saw the fund-raising of NGOs for tsunami relief as a form of exploitation of tsunami suffering for the enrichment and benefit of the NGOs.

Some people had more specific experiences that troubled them. One group reported that an NGO had given them funds before Ramadan that they were supposed to use to start a cooperative. However, they had needed to use this money to purchase things for the Eid festivities. Now the NGO wants them to pay it back with interest. (The Listening team interpreted this as a miscommunication in which the NGO was launching a credit program, but people did not understand this so used the funds for the end of Ramadan. Now they cannot pay back. The NGO's timing, providing funds just before the end of Ramadan, resulted in a misinterpretation and unnecessary problem.)

One topic that was frequently raised had to do with NGO use of Cash-for-Work. In a number of instances, NGOs had paid people to clear debris from tsunami areas or to undertake other "public good" projects. Because within Aceh there is a historic tradition of *gotong royong* (mutual self help) by which people regularly have joined to clean public spaces, some people criticized the international NGOs for undermining this. They feared that an important and valuable aspect of Indonesian community life was threatened by the failure of foreigners to respect it and rely on it. Others (in what seemed to be about equal numbers) thought that there was a clear enough difference between what NGOs pay for through Cash-for-Work and *gotong royong* that the latter would not be undermined over the long run. In one village, people told the LP team that they could not have cleared their former village area under the traditional mutual help system for two reasons. First, the amount of debris was so great that some heavy equipment was required to do some of the clearing. Second, the physical labor required to do the entire job would mean that everyone had to work every day of the week for a long time period. Because *gotong royong* is not paid, they could not afford to rely on this system for full time work over an extended period.

They all needed to earn some income for some days of each week. They noted that the usual *gotong royong* system required that people work without pay for only one day per week or per month. This they would still be happy to do, they said.

Several people commented that the only mistake of Cash-for-Work was that, too often, foreigners referred to it as *gotong royong*, which it is not. They thought it would be wise to use different words to make clear the distinction and that this would ensure that traditions were not undermined.

Some people noted that international NGOs spend lots of money on themselves. One person said that a number of local staff have commented to her that “the international staff look for the best when they are buying for themselves, such as when they buy cars or rent houses, but that when they arrange for programs for the tsunami victims, they are always trying to save money.” This referred to the fact that NGOs invite bids for contracts and try to choose the least expensive offers.

Many people indicated that, so far, the effects of the international presence had been “no problem.” Some went on to say that it was important for internationals to respect local customs and traditions. The most important to many people seemed to be respect for prayer times. A number mentioned the importance of foreign people dressing appropriately. .

A number of people felt that they would benefit from even greater international presence, especially to monitor the distribution of assistance and ensure its fairness. However, most people who mentioned timing seemed to expect that the international agencies would soon leave and that this was appropriate. One person commented that international aid “should only be for one or two years.” Another said, “Once everyone has a house, the international agencies should go back home and prepare to help people in another part of the world where there is a disaster.” One said, “Rehabilitating livelihoods should not take more than three months.” One person said, “I would like the NGOs to stay forever.”

Listening Project Reflections on the International Presence:

In general, the humanitarian community has received far more appreciation and praise in this setting than is often the case. Partly, this is because the area has been so closed to internationals so there is no negative history of interaction. This means that the agencies who entered Aceh have had a major responsibility to set the tone and do their work in ways that build on the general good will they found there.

The LP teams found a striking mismatch between the expectations of village people that the international community would (and should) leave within a short time period, once the job was done, and the expectations of the international agencies that they should undertake longer-term development in the region. This is an area where additional communication between the groups would likely be important for how things go in the coming months.

VI. On Reactions/Responses to the Listening Project

Before we began our conversations, the Listening teams had discussed the importance of telling everyone with whom we spoke that we were not going to deliver any assistance. As we encountered the disappointed expectations of many people, we were even more careful to be sure that we always were completely clear that we were “only talking with them and wanting to hear their ideas and opinions” rather than preparing to provide help.

When this was explained, one small group of young girls jokingly told one team that if they wanted to keep talking, they would have to pay each girl Rp 2500! (The conversation proceeded—without payment—from some time.)

One woman accosted one team, insisting that they write down the information about who they were, where they came from, and how they could be reached because she had been trained in a UNIFEM course that she should always insist on this from anyone who came into her village and began asking questions. As the conversation went forward, after the team agreed and provided her with the information she asked for, she seemed to understand the purpose of the Listening Project and to engage in the issues.

One man said that the Listening team “should stop taking notes and start giving aid.”

And one man said “writing down notes on a piece of paper can be lost, but coming here and staying with us for a week can imprint our experiences on your heart.”

A large number of people noted that “no one has ever asked us our opinion of aid before this.” One woman tea shop owner said that, although she had had foreigners come and eat in her teashop a number of times, none had ever talked with her before.” Quite often, the teams were thanked for listening. In some cases, team members and those in the conversations became very engaged in thinking about the international assistance process and discussed getting together further to talk more.

In general, people were ready and willing to talk, to describe their experiences and to think about ways to make the assistance work more effectively. They understood that their ideas would be fed back into a larger, and longer-term process, rather than resulting in immediate change that they would see. A number of people said they were happy to contribute this way and hoped that someday, other people would benefit from their experience. A few groups asked if we would share our findings with them when we had finished this work. We shall do so.

[report finalized January 2006 with inputs from Listening Project Team members who were involved in conversations in Aceh.]



LISTENING PROJECT

Field Visit Report

Ethiopia, October 2006

This field visit report is one of a series of reports developed as part of the Listening Project (LP), directed by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. The LP reports were not written as evaluations; rather, they were written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across the range of reports. This report is not intended for citation or publication. It is not a final product of the Listening Project.

Background on the Listening Project

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international NGOs, donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has 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 insights 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 and/or peacebuilding 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 outcomes of such international efforts.

Over a period of two years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty countries, with Ethiopia being the third so far. The project will gather what we hear from people in all of these locations in order to integrate these insights into future work and, thereby, to improve its effectiveness.

The Listening Project in Ethiopia

The Listening Project (LP) organized a two-week field effort in Ethiopia in October 2006. CARE International, Catholic Relief Services, CHF International, International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps, Oxfam America and Save the Children/USA collaborated with CDA in arranging for and carrying out the field visit of the Listening Project in Ethiopia. Each of these agencies provided funds, staff and other in-kind support (hospitality, transport, etc.) to the effort, and CDA sent three facilitators to Ethiopia to work with the agencies. A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those who were involved in Ethiopia deserve great appreciation for their generous logistical support and the insights and dedication of all the staff who participated.

The LP teams did not work from pre-set questions or an interview protocol. Rather we told people that, as individuals engaged in international aid work, we were interested to hear from them about how they saw these efforts. We asked if they would be willing to spend some time with us, telling us their opinions and ideas. In this way, we opened conversations on their issues of concern, without pre-judging the exact topics and directions. We wanted people with whom we spoke to take the lead in raising the issues that most concern them.

Eight teams of “listeners,” each composed of one or two Ethiopian staff from the participating agencies and one international staff from the agencies or from CDA, visited districts (woredas) in four regions of Ethiopia – Addis Ababa, Borana (in and around Negelle woreda), West Hararghe (in and around Daro Labu, Doba, Miesso, and Chiro woredas), and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (in and around Butajira, Meskan, Shashemene, Alaba, and Dalocha woredas). Some conversations involved one or two individuals; others were with larger groups (from three to twelve people) who gathered around to talk as our conversations proceeded.

In most cases, conversations were not pre-arranged and the LP teams usually began with a visit to the head of the district (woreda) administration and/or the village leaders (kebele), both to engage them in conversations about their involvement in and opinions on the impact of international

assistance and to ask permission to talk with other people in their areas. In order to expand the range of people to whom we listened, several teams also spoke to agricultural development officers, businesspeople, health workers, school principals, teachers and students. In each location, teams talked to a range of mostly randomly selected people, some of whom had been direct recipients of international aid and some of whom had not. In general, the teams found people willing to talk with us and open in reflecting on their observations.

In the four regions and over the course of five days, the listening teams held over 100 conversations of varying length and depth with over 350 people. The conversations included people from various ethnic and religious groups; adult men and women; the elderly and youth; a great number of farmers and pastoralists; several district and village officials and community leaders; people in urban and rural areas; and people who held leadership positions and those who felt marginalized.

We were fortunate to have opportunities to listen to so many people with a range of perspectives. Nonetheless, we are aware that what we heard represents only a small fraction of the opinions and judgments of all Ethiopians. We therefore do not draw broad conclusions from this visit. Instead, we have captured a valuable snapshot of some perspectives and some opinions of some people. Over the coming months, as we listen in many more locations, we will continually look for common themes, attitudes, conclusions and judgments. At the end of each section below, we reflect on some of the questions that are raised by what we heard that seem to deserve more listening and analysis.

A Note on the Context in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has experienced numerous droughts and famines in the last four decades, with the worst being the famines of 1973-74 and 1984-85. Besides the recurrent humanitarian crises, Ethiopia has fought a war with Eritrean forces in 1998–2000, and there are on-going internal conflicts with several regional liberation fronts. The devastating droughts, regional and internal insecurity, population concentrations in rural areas, spread of HIV/AIDS and chronic food insecurity all lend increased complexity to the nature of emergency and development assistance in this nation. These conditions also shape the background against which people raised the issues about aid that they consider important.

The bulk of international assistance to the Ethiopian people and government has been humanitarian aid, though more recently there has been an increase in development assistance. Hundreds of international and local NGOs, United Nations agencies (notably, the World Food Program), religious charities, and bilateral and multilateral donors have been involved in providing assistance in Ethiopia. Numerous reports and evaluations have been written on individual agencies' programs and projects. The Listening Project does not intend to duplicate or repeat these evaluations, but rather to hear what people think about the cumulative and overall impacts of the range of aid efforts undertaken to support the people of Ethiopia.

What We Heard

I. On the Types and Quality of Assistance:

Given the long history of international assistance in Ethiopia and the broad scope of our conversations, people talked about a range of relief and development assistance efforts.

On Food Aid:

Many people commented on the significance of food assistance in saving lives during the droughts and famines. Comments such as, “many people would have died without food aid” and “if it wasn’t for the intervention of NGOs, we would have already died” were echoed in all regions, even where food aid was never the principal form of assistance and is no longer distributed today. People greatly appreciated the food assistance because they “did not have to get loans from moneylenders or sell valuable assets, such as livestock.”

However, many people also pointed out the limits of relief assistance. For example, one person said, “Emergency aid helps us weather bad times. It’s OK. But things like oxen that don’t run out are better.” There were a few complaints about what was distributed, but in general people seem to have adapted to what was provided. For example, some women said they had learned to cook with wheat and other grains that were different from what they normally use when these were provided.

We heard mixed reports on the impact of supplemental feeding programs linked to schools. Some said that these feeding programs helped increase school attendance, including attendance by girls. But in several cases, people said the increased attendance was not sustained after the relief programs ended.

On Asset Recovery and Creation

Most people said that programs that focus on asset recovery and asset creation help decrease their vulnerability to Ethiopia’s periodic emergencies. Members of several women’s associations engaged in livestock projects remarked about their increased sense of economic security from cattle ownership and associated income-generating activities.

However in a number of communities, people talked about livestock programs funded by foreign donors in which a lot of the animals died because of disease and lack of veterinary services. People were concerned by poor monitoring and what they saw as an incomplete package of assistance. In one region, people involved in a livestock program told us that the cash their group received to purchase livestock was not enough to buy the intended number of cattle because the local vendors raised the prices knowing that the group was using NGO funds. The international NGO had anticipated this problem and worked with the community to resolve it. However, they also acknowledge that the same price inflation occurs when NGOs buy directly from vendors and then distribute the cattle.

On Infrastructure Development:

Many people said they valued the increased access among villages, towns and markets made possible by road and bridge construction. A number of people said that they wished the government and international agencies would build more secondary and tertiary roads to allow more access to markets, health services and schools. For example, some women told of organizing to sell some of their products but, because of bad roads, they often could not reach markets. This meant they had to sell to local traders for lower prices because they do not have easy access to wholesalers.

One woreda official talked about schools that were constructed by a foreign government agency thirty years ago. He said these are significantly better in quality than most of the school construction projects by NGOs and the government now. People noted that some schools in their areas lack furniture, so fewer kids attend because they do not want to sit on the ground.

We heard positive and negative comments about dams, irrigation systems and water-retention projects constructed by international agencies and the government. In one community people said, “We used to lose soil to rain, but now NGOs have built dams and we have seen many changes in our agricultural techniques. Also because of dams we have more trees.” In another people said: “we used to drink dirty water, but now we have clean water and we are healthier.”

Others told of water systems that have dried up or never functioned or that were located at distances that were too far away to be useful. Others described how dams have caused long-term damage to natural water sources in the area. Many people told of water-retention ponds that do not function and which breed mosquitoes and increase malaria cases. Water from many of the ponds evaporates because of a lack of covers or the poor quality of the plastic used to construct them.

On Agricultural Assistance

A number of people said that agricultural and natural resource management training has helped many communities and individuals by introducing improved methods for terracing, soil conservation and planting. Many people who received training commented that their farming efforts are now “more efficient and sustainable.” As one person said “the trained people are here and they are educating the community. The knowledge will pass from generation to generation.”

However, other people talked about agricultural projects which were “transplanted” to other areas without adjusting to the local environment. In one case, an agency provided seeds without consulting anyone from the region about the local soil, and the seeds did not grow. Several people talked about the poor quality of distributed seeds that did not yield any crops and the lack of follow-up or options for seed replacement. Other communities talked about NGOs that distributed seed vouchers to farmers to buy seeds directly from local vendors. However, these vendors sometimes provided lower quality seeds or cheated the farmers during weighing.

On Capacity Building:

Many people said that capacity-building and training provided by NGOs have introduced new knowledge and changed their communities. One district official 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. He also saw it as a successful example of coordination between NGOs and the district government.

A number of people said that the training they received on breastfeeding and weaning practices, proper hygiene, nutrition, and construction of dry latrines has improved their health and the health of their children. In one community where an international NGO has worked on multiple projects for a lengthy period of time, people greatly valued the impact of training they had received, saying they had learned “how to manage resources better and to eat different things at different times.” Similar accounts were heard in other agricultural and pastoralist communities about training for traditional birth attendants and veterinary services that equipped 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 one region, many women said they welcomed the recent access to family planning and reproductive health services through health posts, though few women said that they have influence on family planning decisions in their household. Some people commented on gender training they received from the local government, and several men told us that they no longer marry off daughters

without their consent and that the number of abductions for marriage has been reduced. Several community members commented that “before, just the boys went to school. Now, the kebele is training on this and we send our girls to school. Now, our children can help us go to market and negotiate better prices.”

In two regions we visited, people said that HIV/AIDS and gender training had improved relations between husbands and wives. In several communities where men and women had participated in community conversations on female circumcision facilitated by a local NGO, people reported that the result was abandonment of this “harmful practice.” Both male and female high school students spoke to us about changes in their attitudes regarding women’s roles in domestic and community affairs. Female high school students told us “We know men and women are equal, but boys don’t always like it. We have to keep fighting for it. Change takes a long time.”

Some community members said that they recognize women’s roles and participation in community meetings as a result of women’s inclusion in skills and business training by NGOs. In pastoralist areas, many women commented about increased control over resources, saying that husbands now discuss the sale of livestock with them although the final decision remains with the male. In another region, women asserted, “Yes, the relationship with our husbands has improved. Now, we’re contributing to the household income. Our husbands appreciate this.” We heard several men say that “because NGOs hired women for their projects, we began to see women as capable to do everything, and as more equal.”

One person said “the source of any problem is ignorance. We have resources but we do not know how to use them.” People told us about an agency that provided a loan and training to a savings group which later successfully repaid the loan. But, some people said there is a need for refresher training, especially for illiterate residents because they cannot refer to notes or books. Another training participant said, “If the organization left today, what we learned will stay with us. We did not learn for the organization, we learned for us.”

However, some people complained about the lack of resources to put training into action. For example, some farmers attended training on the use of improved seeds and fertilizers, but were not given any seeds or fertilizers and cannot afford to buy them in the market. People also talked about train-the-trainer programs in which the trainers did not train people in the communities as planned by the NGOs.

Listening Project Reflections on the Types and Quality of Assistance:

The fact that there has not been a major famine in Ethiopia since the 1980s could point to a concerted effort and investment on the part of the international community and the Ethiopian government to monitor food security and to pre-position food aid in different regions of the country. However, droughts continue to disrupt the lives and livelihoods of subsistence farmers and pastoralist communities.

We heard so many positive comments on projects that provide skills and improve knowledge that the Listening Teams questioned whether people ever say anything bad about training. When the LP teams analyzed the conversations, they urged that more thought be given to how to assess the sustainability and impact of training. They noted that the analysis of people with whom they talked definitely called into question the value of one day trainings and of train-the-trainer approaches

without sufficient follow-up. When considering obstacles such as the distance it takes to travel to some training locations in towns, many people in the communities suggested community-based training is more effective.

While many people talked about the poor quality of some goods and services, most attributed the failures to a lack of monitoring and follow-up by aid agencies. Aid agencies know that services and goods they provide should be of high and consistent quality and should not damage existing resources. Again and again, in conversations with people in Ethiopia (as elsewhere), we find ways in which agencies have not met these standards. A continuing question for further analysis for the LP and others is why is this so? Why do we continue to provide goods “as usual” even when we know, and have heard again and again, how these are often not appropriate, of sufficient quality, tailored to local circumstances, etc.?

II. On Relief vs. Development Assistance:

Many people noted that humanitarian assistance provided by NGOs is often not followed by or linked to development assistance to help people recover their assets and reduce their vulnerability. 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 doesn’t build assets.” People 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.”

Some people offered their analysis “that the amount of money spent on aid has not resulted in as many positive changes as it should have.” One villager said that “from the radio reports” he heard about the amount of money provided to Ethiopia, “there should be enough to meet our needs”, and he wondered why he hadn’t “seen more results from the millions that have been given.” He noted that there seemed “to be a huge amount of money spent on relief in comparison to development” aid. Another person expressed his suspicion of international assistance by saying “Even if money is given for international aid it doesn’t all land here. I believe that money does not reach here.”

Several people noted that since decentralization of government authority began in 2003, there has been a shift by the government and aid agencies towards more development assistance, but that much more needs to be invested to decrease dependency and the recurring need for relief.

On Dependency

Many people said they do not want to be dependent on outside assistance. A group of men referred to the negative impacts of dependency in a proverb: “Another person’s hand can either strangle you or make you smaller.” Another group of villagers regretfully observed that, “If NGO and government projects left tomorrow, we will go back to being poor.” Elders in an agro-pastoralist community observed that “when outside help is brought in, it leads us to ignore routine activity and we have not benefited from this. Do not expect change through food aid unless it is a crisis time. Awareness and mobilization are our priorities.”

A number of people noted that assistance over time “can make people lazy when they begin to expect it.” One person declared that the “side effects of aid are that people work less, but it’s not bad to depend on government.” One suggestion for improving future relief assistance was to also provide food and health support to livestock in a crisis so that people can retain their livelihoods and “stand on their own feet faster” after the crisis passes.

In a few communities, people said that projects which had taken a holistic approach with a focus on livelihoods, health, education, and skills-building within select communities were successful in supporting communities to better solve their problems over the long-term. By working together and through the training they had received, they felt less dependent on aid agencies and more confident in their own abilities.

On the Root Causes of Vulnerability:

People named the following **causes of vulnerability** that have left them dependent on aid:

- § Landholdings are decreasing as each generation splits the land and they have insufficient resources to be self-sufficient. Farmers lease land from the government and are not allowed to sell or expand it without government permission.
- § The population growth in rural areas is high and there is no government guidance on family planning and sizes. Some women expressed the need for more family planning assistance.
- § Unpredictable weather patterns and the decrease in rainfall lead to periodic droughts and dependency on foreign grain. Farmers told us, “If we had rain we could have more food.” In talking about their dependency on food aid, one person said: “When it doesn’t rain here, no problem as long as it rains in Canada, where we can get wheat.”
- § Most farmers and agro-pastoralists involved in subsistence agriculture have little access to information, training, tools and skills to improve their farming methods and to diversify their crops. People said that “NGOs need to teach people how to fish, not just give them fish.”
- § Some people recognize the effects of their farming on long-term soil degradation, but felt that they had few alternatives to provide for their families. Some mentioned an effort by the government to resettle people into more arable lands, but most resist moving and said that the effort is leading to conflict in some areas.
- § Many farmers who received improved seeds require fertilizers which they often get on credit. To pay for the fertilizers, many had to sell their assets. Some people said, “We got government fertilizers, but it didn’t help. We had to take out loans to get it, but we were unable to pay them back. We were unable to even feed our children. Now we have a debt with the government of over 200 Birr.” They believe that if the government does not control fertilizer prices they will continue losing their assets and will remain chronically vulnerable to drought and failed crops.
- § Many communities are struggling with unclean water and lack of irrigation systems.
- § Many people mentioned that they have no access to credit or working capital for sustainable income generating activities. People said they cannot afford to participate in the government loan scheme as the initial payment required to get the loan is very high (around 40%, according to the people we talked to) which makes it close to impossible to a) get the loan in the first place, b) have enough money to actually start a business, and c) repay the loan.

On Community Resilience and Coping Mechanisms:

People talked about a range of ways they cope with difficult times. Some said they sell charcoal and firewood; some reported leaving their land and searching for employment or day labor. Some say they have tried growing drought resistant plants (mangoes, etc) and/or eating different things like cactus. Others talked about sharing and pooling resources including the aid they received (some sharing the aid they got with others who were more in need). In some pastoral areas, people reported having started some subsistence agriculture. In some areas, women said they coped by saving some of the food aid they got for later instead of using it all when it was distributed; others spoke of saving seeds to plant when the rains came.

Some people spoke positively about NGO projects that encouraged them to work together in collective production activities to increase their income. Women especially said they felt more empowered when working together. For example, a group of women potters told of receiving seed money from an NGO to start their pottery cooperative. The participants said “we have better skills now. Before, we sold our pots for very little, and just had enough income for our household needs. Now, we can send our kids to school and buy clothes.”

Other people told us of groups-based projects that were abused or poorly led when their accountability mechanisms broke down. In one area, we spoke to a women’s saving group that had been formed by an aid project and they did not even know where their funds had been kept. They said that this fostered distrust and led some to start seeking loans on their own, rather than working together. People talked about a number of examples of mismanagement of group assets, lack of follow up and lack of transparency when savings groups were organized by, and relied on, external actors such as NGOs and the government to support their management.

On a Future Vision and Development Assistance:

A number of people had specific suggestions on how development assistance could be improved in the future. Many said that dependency on aid would decrease if more projects were focused on asset building. Some said that they would like to see the current livelihood and livestock programs expanded to benefit more people. A number of people talked about the need to diversify away from farming and livestock since the land cannot sustain an increasing population, especially when the rains are not consistent. A few people suggested that income-generating projects should also focus on non-agricultural projects and in semi-urban and urban areas.

As noted above in the section on Infrastructure, people value the development of infrastructure, such as electricity, irrigation schemes, bridges and roads. To support future development and decrease vulnerability, farmers said they wanted help in developing better access to markets. Pastoralists said that a livestock exchange or market for animal by-products would enable them to make more money from their livestock.

Although many people thought additional access to education would increase their employability, others told of having finished school but still being unemployed. These people said that they felt jobs were essential for reducing their long term vulnerability. Especially in villages and towns, many said “I want a job.”

In pastoralist and agro-pastoralist areas, people said they could improve their productivity if they had more training on animal health, veterinary services and on agricultural techniques such as terracing and soil conservation. Many people expressed interest in receiving information and training which as someone said “makes us more informed and capable to be self-reliant.”

Although they did not make the link to future security, many people said they need more access to health education, health services, medicines, and medical staff in health posts. In one village, the women and a health worker we spoke to were very sad after a woman had died the night before in childbirth as a group of men tried to carry her several miles to a hospital. They felt that some deaths could be prevented with better roads to reach the hospital and more highly trained medical personnel at local health posts.

Listening Project Reflections on Relief vs. Development Assistance:

People clearly want more development assistance than they think they have received. They expressed a strong desire to break out of dependency on relief assistance. However, the list of ideas about what will make this possible (roads, water, health, education, training, support for livestock, support for agriculture, etc.) is being tried by many aid agencies. Yet, people clearly feel as vulnerable to drought as before.

We heard enough people talk about the “value” of working together, and about ways aid programs could (and do) encourage this, that it raised a question in the discussion of the LP teams. When resources are limited (as they always are), the decision about whether assistance should go to a whole community or to individuals appears to be critically important for determining outcomes. However, the evidence seems mixed as to which option more often has more sustainable developmental results. Some team members saw evidence that excluding those who are just above the threshold for receiving assistance creates a “poverty trap” that leaves people who do not receive aid worse off than those who do receive aid. Another area for additional learning and analysis then, is under what conditions does community-based vs. individual-based assistance yield more effective and sustainable results?

Another issue for further analysis raised by what we heard in Ethiopia is whether a holistic approach undertaken by one aid agency to address multiple needs in a single community has a more positive long-term impact than multiple projects dealing with the same range of issues but undertaken by different agencies in the same community.

III. On the Productive Safety Net Program:

Many people commented on the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP, often called the “safety net”) which is managed by the Ethiopian government with the support of several bilateral and multi-lateral donors. The program aims to protect individual assets of the most vulnerable through cash and food transfers and create community assets through construction of roads, health posts, schools, etc. Only those most vulnerable such as the elderly, disabled and orphans who cannot work are receiving free food assistance. Several international aid agencies are involved in the implementation of the safety net in different parts of the country, and because it is a recent program and targets the most vulnerable throughout the country, virtually all Listening Teams heard a lot of opinions about the safety net.

On Targeting and Beneficiary Selection:

Many people did not know why some kebeles were selected simultaneously for the safety net and for the Employment Generation Scheme (another government administered program), others for just safety net, and others for neither. People also asked “Why are some individuals and households selected in our village and others are not?” or “Why are some villages selected for certain projects and others are not?” Many people believe selection criteria exist on paper but in reality are not used by those doing the selecting.

For example, one kebele leader said he selects beneficiaries for food-for-work programs using his own criteria such as those “who work hard.” A number of people talked about favoritism and nepotism in the beneficiary selection process, but said that there is no room for complaining and no flexibility or method for re-selection in many cases. Some felt that NGOs are afraid to confront the government officials on the problems because they want to sustain good working relationships.

Some zonal officials echoed the comments made by community members about the local implementation and selection of beneficiaries not always following the guidelines.

In several places, the kebele officials said that they had community meetings to form the list of beneficiaries, but most people in the communities never saw or heard the list to validate it. Often new names would appear on the list later, and people suggested that the lists of beneficiaries should be made public to promote transparency. When asked whether this would expose people's vulnerabilities, one person said, "Culturally, it is not ok for people to say they are poor, but the poverty is severe. People now say how poor they are although it is difficult."

In some cases, elders were responsible for identifying beneficiaries and in other cases, community meetings were held to form the list of the neediest. One group of women pastoralists said that they were asked by the government who should get money and grain. They said that everyone in their community knows who the "neediest" are.

In one community of about 3,800 people, 680 individuals were benefiting from food aid and we were told that a lot of others who need aid are not getting it. People said that "There are some who are poor and sick, and not on the safety net list." For example, one woman said she does not receive any support, even though she has many children and is very destitute, because she is registered under her husband's name and since only one person per household is allowed to participate in food-for-work projects, she is left out of the system as her husband takes his earnings to his unregistered wife and children.

Some people talked about the challenges for people in remote villages to participate in the safety net program since they have to walk long distances to reach the public works construction sites. In many areas, women who have other household duties also find it difficult to participate in the program.

One women's association stated that committees registering people as recipients under the safety net were not doing so honestly because they were registering people "who had enough resources." Some people commented that those who are receiving the assistance are becoming better off, while those who are not targeted are now poorer and more vulnerable, therefore indicating a reversal of fortune in the communities in which the total number of vulnerable is not changing.

In a few places, people who were benefiting from other NGO projects may be excluded from the safety net even though they still meet the vulnerability criteria. One group of farmers who were not included in the safety net said they understood the selection criteria and process, had participated in selecting beneficiaries, and wished they could benefit from the safety net too, but understood that the resources were limited.

There were some positive examples in dealing with these issues, including one district where officials initiated an investigation in response to complaints about the unfair selection process. They found around 90% of beneficiaries were correctly chosen and so adjusted the selection process and allowed more vulnerable people to join the program.

On the assistance provided:

Most people appreciated the "food-for-work" or "cash-for-work" assistance under the safety net because "it was not free aid and it engaged us in building permanent infrastructure projects that

benefit the entire community.” People pointed out that the government staff administering the safety net program repeatedly talked to communities about the importance of building assets while participating in the safety net program, which they were careful to emphasize will only last three to five years.

Communities usually did not know who decided whether they should get paid in cash or food. Some said they preferred food because when they get cash they “waste it.” Others prefer cash because they can invest it into savings groups or buy livestock. A number of people said that “the safety net payments are only enough to buy clothes and food, not enough to build assets and improve our lives. The amount of money should be more.” There were also a number of complaints about the time lag between when people do the work and when they receive their payments.

People in all areas we visited said that the safety net food rations and payments meant to cover the entire household are not enough to meet the nutritional needs of all family members. One person asked, “How am I supposed to choose which child to feed?”

A number of people were critical about the safety net policies that prioritize terracing on communal land vs. on individual/household plots. A number of people would like to see both communal and individual plots targeted to increase the long-term impact.

On Negative Unintended Impacts

In a few places, people said that the lack of transparency in the beneficiary selection process has increased distrust and caused tensions between those making the decisions and people in the communities.

Some people commented that the cash-for-work and food-for-work approach may be decreasing community participation and the spirit of volunteerism since people are now expecting to be paid for their labor. For instance in one village, people would not volunteer on a water project being implemented by an NGO after they had been paid to work under the safety net program.

In at least one community, people said that a project implemented by an international NGO linking health, education, water and sanitation had stopped when the safety net started and that some other awareness raising programs are not continuing as attention is now focused on the safety net.

People in urban areas said that they are becoming more vulnerable because they are not selected for the safety net and are increasingly hurt by rising prices for food when farmers, who often get safety net cash-for-work, choose to hold on to their goods and sell later at higher prices.

Listening Project Reflections on the Safety Net Program:

It is too early to assess the impact of the safety net program, but there is clearly a need for more monitoring, transparency, and communication about the program at the village, district, regional and federal levels. The fact that the cash or food for work approach may be decreasing volunteerism and community cohesion certainly needs further analysis.

IV. On Coordination and Communication:

On Coordination between NGOs and the Government (zonal, district and community-level):

A number of people commented positively on the increased coordination between NGOs and the government since the decentralization process began in 2003. Several NGOs were positively noted for working with communities and the government from the start when assessing needs and planning projects. For example, people in one community talked about a water project which was built by an international NGO in close cooperation with the kebele leadership, in which a community contribution system was established. The funds from the contributions were used to pay for maintenance of the pump and people in the community said this project was sustainable because the kebele leadership was involved from the start.

We also heard from several officials about increased cooperation and coordination with NGOs on disaster preparedness and health programs. In one example, staff in a government-run health clinic received training from an international NGO on malaria testing and provision of nets and has since become a focal point for malaria interventions in the area.

Several government officials said “NGOs do good work” and that they discuss programs in an NGO-Government forum. However, they also mentioned that most of these discussions focused on the plans that the NGOs *had already made* rather than on the problems and how best to solve them. Some local officials said that often they are just told by their superiors to support projects to be implemented in their districts or villages, and that plans are determined at the national level with little local input. They feel that top-down program design and agreements made in the capital leave little control or ownership at the local level, and that they want to be more involved in the project design process.

Some government officials also said that international NGO projects are too donor-driven and that agencies rarely hold discussions with local governments on their budgets and long-term expectations. Many local government officials talked about continued dependency on NGOs due to lack of capacity and resources to sustain many projects after they are handed over to the government or communities. Even when planning is done more locally, financial resources are still centrally controlled, leaving zonal and district officials with little control and resources.

Some government officials also said they had few resources to monitor and evaluate projects on the ground, and that this affects sustainability if NGOs are planning for the government to take over projects it has not monitored during implementation. A few officials noted positive examples of international NGOs taking government staff along with them to monitor projects in remote areas.

Several people talked about problems with coordination between similar NGO and government-run programs. In one area, a district official talked about confusion and problems in local villages where some residents were selected to receive livestock from an NGO in the form of a grant while others took part in the government’s revolving fund to buy livestock. As a result, some beneficiaries were unsure about their responsibilities as participants in these schemes and some were upset that they had to pay for what others received for free

In other areas, people wanted clarification on the roles and responsibilities of international NGOs, local NGOs and the government who are all “doing projects here in our village.” We heard people, especially women, say that they often don’t know who to talk to, particularly when international NGOs have served as the initial liaison or link between communities and the government.

In at least one region, officials wanted NGOs to work in areas that the government cannot access, saying that “NGOs usually work in easy to access places.” In another district, an official said he “doesn’t know what NGOs do at the grassroots level” and expressed the need for more transparency and coordination. However, he also acknowledged that there has been a lot of turnover of officials which can make it difficult for NGOs to keep people informed and build relationships.

Some district officials said that international NGOs “do not spend enough time to select the right beneficiaries and rely too much on the kebele leaders to choose beneficiaries.” At the same time, people in some villages felt that woreda and kebele officials acted as gate-keepers between communities and aid agencies. Some said “there is no need to strengthen local government but a need for NGOs to come straight to communities.”

Many communities view international NGOs as more impartial than the government. However, a few people intimated that NGOs that closely cooperate with the government are not seen as impartial, especially by those who do not support the current government or who are unhappy with the targeting of assistance. An urban resident said that “NGOs follow the interest of the national government and focus on rural areas” (not urban areas which are not the base for the ruling party).

On Coordination between Communities and Government:

Several people said that aid projects are more successful when there is a purposeful effort to link communities with the government throughout the program. People gave several examples of successful water and micro-enterprise projects in which the local government and village residents focused on sustainability of the project by planning for it from the start. We also heard about infrastructure projects such as schools and roads that the government was organizing with communities outside of the safety net program. In one example, a village school operated and partially funded by the community and local kebele utilized a successful self-financing mechanism in which the money raised by the community expanded the limited funding stream for teachers’ salaries provided by local government.

In one pastoralist area, people appreciated increased coordination and discussions with the government as part of one international agency’s livelihood project. The elders stated that in the past, the government law was weakening their traditional law by mixing up clan structures. The increased dialogue with the government is strengthening the traditional system in which applicable clan rules and regulations for managing water points and settlements are used. One elder said that “Our traditional system is our umbrella” and that it was explicitly being supported by the project.

On Coordination between NGOs:

Some communities were concerned about overlap in international NGO’s projects which targeted the same kebeles and woredas. One district official said “NGOs in this area provide the same exact services and want to work in the same areas leaving other needy areas without assistance.” He suggested that NGOs need to coordinate their work better to reach more communities and more remote areas.

The LP teams discovered that in some areas, people found it hard to distinguish between international and local NGOs, but that they generally see the cumulative impact of their projects as positive. In some areas, people talked about international agencies that are based in the capital but implement many of their projects through local partners. Some local officials were not happy with this approach, saying, “Why are you giving your money to local NGOs and not us?” Unfortunately,

the Listening Teams did not speak with any local NGOs and therefore did not hear a lot about international and local NGO coordination.

Listening Project Reflections on Coordination:

It seems that collaborative planning processes at the national level may need to be strengthened to avoid duplication of efforts and to ensure more local input into the decision-making process at the federal or regional level. The Listening Team found many coordinated and collaborative efforts in planning but little or no coordination between the government, NGOs and communities in defining results and measuring impact. We noted a promising practice where purposeful efforts to coordinate with the local government from the beginning increased the likelihood of sustainability and effectiveness. However it is not always evident at what level increased coordination is needed most.

As the government and donors have shifted to more development assistance, and more agencies have started operations in Ethiopia, there is increased competition. It is worth exploring further if and how competitive funding mechanisms are affecting coordination and cooperation among NGOs and donors, as well as with the national, regional and local governments.

The concerns about top-down project design highlight the problem of donor driven aid that we have heard elsewhere. We continue to hear from communities that they want a larger voice in determining priorities for what gets funded, how projects are designed and who gets assisted. The question arises whether enough time and resources are built into the funding process to allow for more involvement by people in the communities and local governments.

Another issue that may require further analysis is capacity building for local government which often targets people and not the institutions. Those who receive training often use it to locate better jobs in the capital or elsewhere. Furthermore, where governance is concerned: is it really the role of NGOs to be ever present in the communities and scrutinize the kebele leaders who are implementing projects and facilitating community-based selection processes? Or can the NGOs do more to help people learn to hold their government more accountable?

On Communication and Transparency:

The gaps in communication were obvious in many cases where community members could not point to who was responsible for a particular project, and often mistook NGOs for the government. In several areas, people were confused about the lifespan of projects initiated by NGOs. In one village, non-beneficiaries expressed confident hopes about receiving livestock from a project; however the NGO is no longer working there.

Some communities recalled participating in numerous needs assessments with no subsequent follow-up and little feedback about ensuing program decisions. Many people did not know why particular people or communities were not selected to receive assistance. One group said that “an NGO came to our village after an emergency to ask many questions and we never heard from them again.”

In the pastoralist areas visited by our teams, people cited fewer issues with transparency and recalled participating in meetings with “experts” or government people who came to talk to them. They saw some of their input later reflected in the projects, and talked about open monthly meetings where they shared experiences and identified and prioritized problems. An NGO in this area supports these public meeting in an effort to revive the traditional system and increase transparency.

People discussed gender differentials in access to information:

The lack of access to information is particularly affecting women because it is men who are most often selected for community meetings and later do not share the information. Women said that “the kebele selects men to go talk and get told things. They don’t come here. They don’t ask women, mainly, they just want representatives. It’s far away, and because women are busy, they can’t go to meetings. Nobody comes here.” Other women who felt marginalized from community decision-making processes said “The woreda and kebele leaders make most of the decisions about projects but there are no women in leadership positions.” One woman said “I don’t go to meetings because my husband doesn’t allow me and he doesn’t tell me what goes on there.” Even in those cases where a woman has been assigned to the kebele leadership, it does not seem to ameliorate the apparent information and participation gaps.

A great number of women we spoke to did not know much about aid projects and were not able to identify who provides assistance in their village, why they were or were not selected, and what community participation in the project is like. The men in the same villages were often able to name the agencies, explain the role of kebele leaders in the consultation process and knew specific details about project implementation.

Listening Project Reflections on Communication and Transparency:

Some agencies communicate with communities and report on their activities, though there still seem to be few opportunities for the government or communities to influence the decision-making of most NGOs. Once programs start, there seems to be less flexibility from agencies to adjust and make changes when needed. Exit strategies and phase-out plans are often not communicated well, leaving communities with unmet expectations and frustration. Some conversations revealed that people and communities take what they can get and do not want to complain because they do not want to lose assistance.

Often aid agencies assume that information will be shared and passed on, but this clearly does not always happen. This is not a new problem, but clearly one that still requires greater attention as a critical piece of program effectiveness. Again the question arises: why do NGOs continue to make this mistake?

V. On the Need for More Community-Driven Development

The following section addresses issues that many people raised regarding the targeting of assistance, community involvement and ownership, sustainability and accountability.

On the Targeting of Assistance:

Some people said that NGOs are not flexible in their targeting and selection criteria and often apply the same approaches to different areas, i.e. highlands vs. lowlands, which do not have the same needs or resources. As one person said “Aid workers should live with us, see how we are living.” Some people think NGOs have a preference for working in the lowlands. People were also concerned that less aid is provided to remote communities and more to easily accessible villages. Listening Teams heard about and saw schools and health posts constructed by the side of the main road, far from the communities they were serving. In some of the more remote areas, a few people said “No one comes here to see how we work, no one supports us. We have always been poor and vulnerable.”

In some of the pastoralist areas, we heard that the destitute are always the priority during the selection process. In other areas, some people said wealth ranking was helpful in selecting beneficiaries, while others said that it is unfair because estimates are made based on projected harvests. People disapproved of agencies determining eligibility based on appearance, with one person saying “Just because you’re dressed ok and you’re clean doesn’t mean you aren’t poor.”

Others said they were stuck in a poverty trap: “I am not poor enough to be helped so therefore I am going to stay poor.” In one farming community, people said “Everyone is just looking to these NGOs for help. But NGOs should see if things are changing so that the same people do not keep benefiting if they are doing better. There are more poor people who can benefit.”

In a few cases, local woreda officials and a few other people commented that the beneficiary selection process is creating tensions in the community on several levels: 1) between district officials selecting the beneficiaries and the community leaders, 2) between people targeted and those that are not, 3) between communities targeted and those that are not. One district official said that traditional communal support mechanisms, were often weakened when aid agencies select beneficiaries. He observed that those slightly better off have often supported the neediest in bad times by sharing what they have, yet they are not selected for assistance to replenish their resources. We heard some community members reflect on this as well, and as one person said: “If you give to me and not to others, I cannot eat alone.”

Many people told us: “There are few projects that focus on women.” District officials as well as community members in several areas suggested that NGOs should purposefully target women for projects such as petty trade and irrigation training. We heard in some areas that no priority was given to the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as female-headed households.

People in urban communities complained about international NGOs not serving the urban population even though there are severe cases of food shortages in towns. People in urban areas raised many concerns about employability, skill-building, income-generating activities and gaining access to micro-credit.

Several people in socially marginalized communities (e.g. blacksmiths who are considered of low caste and are not allowed to farm or own livestock) said that the fact that international and local NGOs work with them demonstrated to the larger community that they are “worthy of attention.”

On Community Involvement and Ownership:

In one area where the community felt very involved in planning and implementing a livestock project with an international NGO, community leaders said that “People are seeing the effects of working together now.” In the same village, those who are not involved in the project are now organizing on their own and villagers commented that “people are proud when they can work together to solve their problems.” The kebele leader noted that this was a change from the previous cooperative system which failed because it was pushed from the top-down by the government.

In other areas, community members who serve on committees set up by NGOs said that they had learned how to manage their problems better, e.g. by understanding risk management and collectively improving coping strategies. The need for communities to be open about their problems in order to solve them was expressed in many instances and was captured by someone who said “A person who hides a disease may not get healed.”

However, many people raised concerns about too little involvement of community members in needs assessments, and a number of people said, “We prefer to be consulted on what we need and want when projects are designed.” There were a few people that said “you know better, you tell us what we need.” In some cases, communities received something they liked but still expressed priorities and needs that were unfulfilled, saying “what we REALLY need is...”

In some areas, only men were involved with the water committees set up by NGOs, even though it is women who collect water. A group of women said, “the NGO came and talked to men about locations for water points and did not ask us. They built five wells very far and we have to walk long distances to fetch water everyday.” In a few communities, people appreciated the water points and were not concerned about not being consulted as long as they had access to water.

In several pastoralist communities, people said they were very engaged in the selection process and nomination of community members for skills training, and that the participatory methods used by the NGO were appropriate and fair. As a pastoralist’s association member said, “We are not looking to the outside for support. That is why we are feeling ownership.”

One community noted that they did not want to participate in a fruit tree project that an NGO suggested, but after seeing the results in a demonstration plot, they had chosen to participate and are now running it on their own. One person said, “When communities can see a difference, then they will change.”

In one village, people proudly talked about helping with pond construction and that even though they were paid very little, they felt a sense of ownership and did not foresee problems with sustainability of the project. In another farming community, people talked about a project six years ago, in which an international aid agency consulted farmers on what new crops they wanted to grow and then acquired the necessary seeds. People appreciated being involved and happily showed us the fruits that they are still growing and profitably selling on the local market. In another village where the same agency had established priorities with the community and engaged them in building a school, one person commented that “we learned to do things ourselves.” When the NGO left the area, the community continued to save money and had added more buildings to the school later. One elder in this community said, “We are happier to do the work, however hard, if we are consulted. If we are not asked, then our hands won’t obey us to do what you want.” They did not want the government and NGOs to treat them as uneducated and to “tell us what we need.”

Listening Project Reflections on Community Involvement and Ownership:

One important concern raised by officials and agencies participating in this exercise was the fact that NGOs are often bound by rigid proposal submission deadlines set by donors and that this hinders their ability to consult communities in the most meaningful way. Some NGOs said that they often have to design programs without specific communities in mind and then later are assigned communities by the government, making it difficult to meet the specific needs of selected communities. This is certainly not a new problem, leaving us to wonder how to help donors or aid agencies adjust their procedures to ensure more community involvement and ownership—and greater impact—in their aid efforts.

The evidence illustrates that consultation does not necessarily equal participation and does not automatically lead to ownership. Critically, people's comments reveal that they want to be connected with both the tangible (things get done better) and the intangible (we feel respected).

On Sustainability:

In one village, people talked about how an international NGO demonstrated how to prevent soil erosion and distributed an initial supply of wire mesh. Seven years later, there is no wire mesh in the local markets, so they use alternative materials such as grain sacks. This method is not as effective and people said that they wished the NGO had used locally available materials from the beginning.

In another area, a group said that their new seedling nursery from an NGO requires special pots which are not available on the market anymore. While this project partially continues, the women were concerned about its success since they could not source the materials they needed after the NGO left. In another area, community members highly praised one agency for a food-for-work project in which people planted a forest as a community-managed asset. While part of it was recently sold to buy a water system for the village, the remaining forest is still managed by the community, and they are very proud of it.

People in several communities talked about women's savings groups that were started by NGOs, and that some are now lending money to those who are not members. In a few places, saving groups' funds have also been used to build communal assets such as grinding mills which the community perceives as sustainable outcomes from these projects.

People in all regions talked about water projects done by NGOs that are no longer utilized, saying that they did not know how to maintain the equipment and were expecting the NGOs or the government to fix them. We heard that the "NGO came and installed water pumps or water points but did not train anyone on how to repair the pumps." In some cases, the community has collected money to hire a technician, but people questioned why there was no training provided for community members to fix it themselves. A peasant association in one region told us about a large scale irrigation project installed by an NGO which broke down and neither the local government nor the community has resources to repair it.

On Accountability:

Many people expressed concern about the lack of accountability by NGOs when projects fail or do not meet their expectations. Residents in several villages said that in revolving schemes (loans, seed banks, livestock, etc.) there was no monitoring mechanism to ensure that the money or goods revolved. For example, several women's savings groups that were encouraged by NGOs later had internal accountability problems, and while there were some public meetings in the past to explain the process, the women complained that no adequate reports or audit existed and they were not sure how to proceed.

In one area, people told us of a dam built by an NGO, which was constructed in and around natural springs, not at the meeting point of two rivers as had been originally planned. During the rainy season, silt and gravel plugged the springs, and as a result, the dam has no water now, the springs are destroyed, farmers do not have enough water and are planting fewer crops now than before. The NGO never fixed the problem and did not explain why they had changed the original location agreed upon with the community. The community asked "how could they be held accountable?"

One group of men told us, “If we have a right to discuss, a right to say to the NGO we don’t want this, our lives would be better.”

One community talked about a faith-based NGO whose staff discriminated against people of different religions during a distribution of goods. The person who was refused aid said she knows that the agency itself does not discriminate on the grounds of faith, but she was concerned about the lack of monitoring by the agency of its own staff.

A few district officials said that “It is hard for the government to monitor or hold NGOs accountable to communities because we do not know about the amounts or resources allocated for projects.”

Listening Project Reflections on Accountability:

All NGOs who operate in Ethiopia sign detailed memos of understanding with the government and are required to provide regular reports. While some government officials have access to this information, there are clearly communication gaps. Even where mechanisms to promote transparency and accountability exist, many local level officials and communities feel they have little input into this “top-down” process. Communities have little power to hold NGOs accountable, and may not even think it is their right to do so.

International NGOs are generally accountable to the legal authorities who grant them status in their home countries and to their donors, and must be equally accountable to the communities with whom they work. Still, some communities recount evidence of negative impact resulting from projects implemented by NGOs. It seems that the Ethiopian government may not enforce strict monitoring and evaluation standards for NGOs partly out of fear of losing assistance.

A note on Potential Biases and Reactions/Responses to the Listening Project

The Listening Teams were aware of some potential biases that could influence some conversations and the themes that were picked up and highlighted by the team members. For example, it is most likely not a coincidence that the team with a large number of women heard repeatedly about gender issues, whereas the group with a larger number of men did not. We are also aware that some beneficiaries are cautious about expressing criticism as they do not want to jeopardize the support they receive. This was especially true if the conversations included representatives from agencies that work in the community.

Overall, the Listening Teams found that people were generally interested and very willing to talk about international assistance. One person said, “We’re happy to see you, but you should know that we haven’t had any help here.” Some people said that they had participated in many assessments and projects, but that they had never seen any of the reports which had been written by international agencies or donors. A few did not have much hope of changing the system and one person said “Why should we tell you what we suggest? No one ever listens to us. Even if you will listen, they won’t, so why should we bother?”

Most people we spoke to understood that we were not carrying out a needs assessment and were glad to hear that we will be sharing their feedback with agencies and donors. Many people appreciated our commitment to provide the report to them (we will translate it into Amharic and Oromifa), and that someone was interested in hearing what they had to say.

While peer review is nothing new, a number of aid agency staff appreciated the opportunity that the Listening Project provided them to share with and learn from colleagues in like-minded organizations. There are a lot of good approaches and promising practices which deserve to be shared and expanded amongst agencies to improve the effectiveness of aid efforts in Ethiopia.

Much of what was heard was not new to aid agencies, which is, in itself, a challenging finding. It begs the question of why are we still hearing about the same problems and in settings where smart aid workers are doing their best to do good work? Why, with so much experience, does aid still not make the significant difference it tries to make in Ethiopia?

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects
17 Dunster Street, Suite 202 Cambridge, MA 02138
Telephone: 617-661-6310 Fax: 617-661-3805
www.cdainc.com