



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?

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