TIME TO LISTEN:

A Discussion Guide

Hearing People
on the Receiving End of
International Aid

C · D · A
practical learning for effective international action

www.cdacollaborative.org
One Alewife Center, Suite 400
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140
USA

@CDALearning
#HearReceivingEnd

Published: March 2015

Acknowledgements

CDA and the authors of *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid,* Mary B. Anderson, Dayna Brown, and Isabella Jean would like to thank Eric Dietrich, Alexander Fertig, Elizabeth Froeberg, Zach Gerth, and Kendal Stewart for their work in preparing this guide. They are all students in the Master of Public Administration in Development Practice program in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, and Eric Dietrich is also a reporter in Bozeman, Montana. We hope that their efforts and enthusiasm will introduce the voices and lessons in *Time to Listen* to development, humanitarian and peacebuilding practitioners at all levels of experience.

Front cover images photographed by: Isabella Jean, Björn Holmberg, and Diego Devesa Laux. Back cover image photographed by Björn Holmberg.

Time to Listen as well as this *Discussion Guide* are available for free download on CDA's website.

Background on CDA and the Listening Project

CDA is a non-profit organization committed to improving the effectiveness of national and international actors who provide humanitarian assistance, engage in peace practice, and are involved in supporting sustainable development. CDA started the Listening Project (LP) in late 2005 as a collaborative learning process to listen to the perspectives and experiences of those on the receiving end of international assistance. By listening with staff from over 130 local and international organizations to nearly 6,000 people in over 20 countries, CDA gathered evidence on the cumulative effects of aid efforts and ideas on how to make international aid more effective. CDA published *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid* at the end of 2012 and has shared the experiences and feedback from local people on how to more meaningfully engage them in aid efforts with a wide range of policy-makers and practitioners.

CDA works with donors, operational aid agencies and others to more effectively listen to and engage with local people, organizations, and governments. If aid providers and recipients together discuss and analyze local challenges and capacities, determine together the options and strategies for addressing them, and evaluate the impacts and effects based on locally defined measures of success, we believe international aid efforts will be more effective. We want to change the way international aid is provided and the roles of outsiders as "suppliers" to "collaborators"—and to capture the lessons from those change processes to inform the work of others.

CDA continues to gather and share lessons and practical recommendations on ways to improve the effectiveness and accountability of aid efforts, on the use of feedback from local actors to improve policies and practices, and on other ways that donors and aid agencies are listening to local voices and engaging them in the decision making processes about assistance meant to support their communities.

Contact Us with your Feedback

In order to support our own ongoing learning and impact assessment processes, CDA welcomes your feedback and requests that you let us know how you are using our materials. Please email your comments and feedback to feedback@cdacollaborative.org, or call our office at +1 (617) 661-6310.

Table of Contents

How to Use this Guide

Time to Listen: A Discussion Guide was developed to stimulate discussion and reflection among practitioners working in international, national and local aid organizations, governments and donors. For those already familiar with *Time to Listen,* this guide will serve as a useful review and as a means to introduce colleagues and partners to the voices and ideas presented in the book on how to improve the effectiveness of international aid efforts. For readers with no prior exposure to the Listening Project or *Time to Listen*, our hope is that the *Discussion Guide* will spark an interest in and a desire to further explore the findings of the Listening Project and the implications for their work.

The format of this guide closely follows the structure of *Time to Listen*, briefly summarizing each chapter and presenting the reader with a series of thought-provoking discussion questions. These questions are intentionally open-ended, allowing users to tailor the discussion to fit their organizational needs. For practitioners, the questions can be used to encourage reflection on their personal approaches and practices. Supervisors can use the questions to encourage reflection and inspire changes among their team members. The questions can also be used in a class setting, allowing educators and students to discuss the implications for future policies and practices.

The authors' ultimate hope is for this guide to bring the voices and perspectives of those on the receiving end of international aid efforts to those who work in (or aspire to work in) and around the international aid system. *The Listening Project* revealed a great deal about the shortcomings of the current aid system and pointed to systemic ways these challenges can be addressed. Changing the aid paradigm will not take place over night, however, this guide, among other tools, offers a starting point for internal reflection and dialogue within aid organizations in order to begin to change how we conceive and implement aid efforts.

> “Without aid, we could not survive, and there would be no life in Kosovo. It is not fair to say that no difference was made; but what was possible was not exactly what was done.”
> *Government official, Kosovo*

Does the way that international assistance is now organized and delivered make sense to those on the receiving end? What are the cumulative effects of international aid efforts on individuals, societies and institutions? What approaches are effective, which are not and how can aid providers be more effective and more meaningfully listen to and engage with those they mean to support?

In order to address these core questions, CDA carried out a broad, systematic effort to listen to the views of people who live in countries where various types of international assistance is given. Over the span of five years, more than 130 international and local aid organizations joined the Listening Project in listening to nearly 6,000 people from 20 aid-recipient countries about their experiences with, and judgments of, international assistance.

The Power of Cumulative Evidence

When listening broadly and in an open-ended way, one might expect a cacophony of views and opinions. In the midst of these differences, however, remarkably consistent patterns and common judgments emerged. The four overarching messages from people in different contexts were:

1. international aid is a good thing that is appreciated;
2. assistance as it is now provided is not achieving its intent;
3. fundamental changes must be made in how aid is provided if it is to become an effective tool in support of positive economic, social, and political change; and
4. these fundamental changes are both possible and doable.

One of the most common views was, “International aid is a good thing, and we are grateful for it…but…” People often cited a specific positive experience, before sharing a thoughtful and clarifying analysis of how aid has worked and has not worked in their societies. Then they discuss how it should, and could, work to make a more positive difference in their lives. The reasons for these shortcomings in international assistance are myriad and complex, but it became clear that, it is the very *processes* of the international assistance system, as it currently operates, that undermine its intended effectiveness.

People consistently describe international assistance as a complex delivery system through which some people “provide” while others “receive” what is assumed to be needed. This supply-driven, top-down provision of goods and services, however, runs counter to the principles of participation, ownership, accountability, and sustainability, which are essential for effective aid. *Time to Listen* posits that the international aid system needs a paradigm shift. People want a system which integrates the resources and experiences of outsiders with the assets and capacities of insiders to collaboratively develop contextually appropriate strategies for supporting positive, lasting changes.

Everyone who works in the international aid enterprise can benefit from listening to the ideas and analyses of those whose lives they aim to support. While many of the arguments are not new, the power of this book is in the cumulative voice and analysis, which demands our attention.

Chapter 2 – The Challenges of Listening: How Do We Hear and Understand What People Really Mean?

> "There is a responsibility for foreigners to quiet their voice. Calm down and visit and get to know the people. Don't run in with your own agenda." *Monk on the Thai-Burma Border*

Listening is a challenge. It is a skill and requires discipline to set aside expectations of what someone will say and to be open to the multiple levels at which people communicate with each other. To listen effectively at the interpersonal-level, one needs first to be quiet long enough to let the other person talk. Then one needs to ask questions about the ideas of the other person, rather than interject one's own opinions or jump to quick conclusions about what the other person means. Above all else, listening is a way of showing respect.

1. Listening Broadly and Systematically

Listening Teams held conversations with a wide range of people and in places where they felt comfortable - in teashops, workplaces, individual homes and gardens, etc. The questions were open-ended, broad, and guided by a commitment to learning how people had experienced or observed aid efforts, and what they thought could be done to make assistance more effective. Rather than typical questionnaires (which most aid agency staff were more familiar and comfortable with), unscripted listening conversations enabled people to reflect on their experiences and observations, and most importantly, to bring up any issues about international aid efforts that mattered to them.

2. Challenges in Listening and Analyzing the Cumulative Voice

The Listening Project had to manage several dilemmas. We had to decide to whom we would listen, how many people to include, how to record their ideas and opinions, how to be sure—as sure as we could be—that we really understood what they were saying. We had to address the contradictions and inconsistencies across regions and countries. We were keenly aware of the inherent predispositions that listening team members have for the opinions expressed by the most articulate people. We had to consider biases people may have given their social standing, affiliations and backgrounds. The teams also had to navigate meanings lost in translation and acknowledge and guard against their own biases.

> "Thank you for listening to us and allowing us to tell you what we would like to tell those who have power over this great power that is international cooperation." *Afro-Ecuadorian Woman in Ecuador*

In order to deal with these significant challenges, the Listening Project provided training to listening teams and developed a rigorous process to systematically analyze the qualitative evidence derived from our listening conversations. Once the conversations were held in each country, the listening teams completed a collective analysis of what they had heard, aiming to find the composite voice of people without submerging minority viewpoints or losing subtlety or nuance. From this analysis, the Listening Project produced field visit reports, which were translated into the national language(s) and circulated more widely in the country and globally. When multiple field visit reports were complete, CDA convened groups of experienced practitioners to analyze the evidence, and to discuss the implications for aid providers. Throughout the listening and analysis process, the Listening Project maintained a strong commitment to ensure that all voices were heard and that all could engage in collaborative learning and analysis.

> "I've heard the stories, I've learned from them, and now I want to spend more time asking questions than giving answers…We have always done monitoring using complicated formats and, while this Listening Project compares to be the simplest exercise, it proves itself to be a vital tool that should be used to communicate effectively with rural communities. I have noticed that taking the LP approach, people are not reserved and it could be because of the informal set-up that comes with LP." *Listening Team Member, Solomon Islands*

1. The chapter mentions that Listening Team members found the listening methodology practical, useful, and refreshing because it was "without heavy protocol requirements or survey tools," as one local facilitator said. What are some of the benefits and challenges of using a methodology that does not require high-level technical capacities but does require good communication skills? Could aspects of a more quantitative-driven data collection methodology be effectively combined with the Learning Projects' qualitative methodology?

2. Listening Team members also described how they appreciated opportunities to listen to people in communities outside of their work areas and to hear more broadly about their experiences with aid efforts. Many said they were excited to be given the time to engage in such open conversations and reflections. What is it about the way the current aid system or your particular organization operates that often serves as a barrier to these types of interactions? How could your organization create space for these kinds of opportunities?

3. What are some of the specific challenges of analyzing and presenting qualitative data? How can those challenges be overcome?

4. After you collect information or listen to people in communities, do you involve them in the analysis of the evidence? Do you share what you have learned with the communities who provided the information? What are the advantages and challenges to engaging communities in the analysis or in sharing the information gathered? How can it be done effectively in the context where you work?

Chapter 3 – The Cumulative Impacts of International Assistance

> "Acceptance bring trust, and trust brings teamwork. If one of the two factors is lacking, the result is the work of only one set of brains." *Villagers in Ecuador*

When the Listening Project asked people who live in aid recipient countries to assess the cumulative impacts of aid on their societies, the responses about the short-term impacts were often positive, but reflected more challenges over the long run with aid project after aid project. While there were differing perspectives, in general there was a consensus that aid can, and has been, helpful for many, but just not to the extent that it could or should be. *People named three specific areas they think should be the focus of international assistance, and what they feel they currently get:*

1. Economic Betterment

People do not want to need assistance, but too often the way aid is provided increases dependency and their sense of powerlessness. In their eyes, international actors bring projects that, instead of addressing the causes of their poverty, seem only to lead to more projects. Competition among aid providers also feeds into people's sense that "someone else is in control" and that they are not the only "beneficiaries." They are invited to "participate" in projects designed and managed by outsiders, which seems to send a message that they are objects, not the subjects, of assistance. Cumulatively and over time, international aid — as it is now given—often engenders passivity and undermines local initiative.

2. Improved Political and Security Conditions

People want improved security and political stability, but they see that aid can worsen conflict and increase tensions among groups. Aid providers frequently define target groups based on ethnicity, religion, age, or other societal characteristics that they believe affect their vulnerability. This process often engenders jealousy amongst the greater population and can reinforce harmful social schisms. In this same vein, people also pointed out how imperative it is for aid providers to learn about local political and social dynamics. Prepackaged programs and approaches developed in one context can translate badly in other local realities. They identified donors' urgency to distribute resources on a set schedule (often "too fast") as undermining opportunities for outsiders to understand local social and political dynamics and to support existing capacities and local priorities.

3. A Sense of Solidarity, Colleagueship, and Support

Although people want solidarity and colleagueship, they more often feel frustrated, mistrusted, and disrespected by the way aid is provided. People talk about how aid agencies disappear after using people's time to conduct surveys, the opaque decision-making processes of donor agencies, and the way aid agencies seemingly ignore the input of the people. All of these things lead to this distrust. In short, people feel that outsiders are making decisions about and for them, rather than with them.

People conclude that without genuine engagement of both recipients and providers in changing the aid system as it now works, international assistance will continue to save some lives (which will be appreciated in the short-term); provide some useful infrastructure, as well as much that is not useful or sustainable; benefit some people and marginalize others (often reinforcing preexisting social and economic inequalities); weaken local structures and undermine local creativity; and simply waste a great deal of money and time contributed by both external and internal actors.

"People want "know-how" before they receive aid. They want to be able to figure things out and to assess their problems for themselves, rather than having NGOs tell the people the issues they face."
Listening Project report, Myanmar/Burma

1. Many of the priorities of people heard by the Listening Project were intangible and subjective things such as 'security' and 'solidarity'. How does your organization measure these things and reconcile their importance given the pre-determined targets and rigid standards and indicators that aid agencies need to meet?

2. What are some examples from your own experience that had positive short-term impacts, but in the longer term were not sustained or did not "add up" to significant changes? What about projects or programs that produced negative short-term and positive long-term results?

3. How do you assess the intended and unintended impacts, and the positive and the negative effects of your projects? How do you assess the cumulative impacts of your projects and of the processes/approaches used?

4. How should aid organizations navigate the reality that supporting positive societal change often leaves some parties unhappy with the change in the status quo?

5. How can aid organizations reconcile their need to secure funding by responding to the priorities of donors with the responsibility to listen and respond to the priorities of the communities they aim to support?

6. How do you engage communities in determining the results they would like to see and how to measure them?

Chapter 4 – What's Wrong with the Current Aid System?

> "International aid is like a large ice cube. As it gets passed through many hands, it becomes smaller. Some beneficiaries get only a few drops." *Town Official, Sri Lanka*

The current aid system originated from a generous response to suffering and need. Over the years, the system for responding to needs has grown in terms of both the actors engaged in it and resources allocated to it. Decades later, two broad trends dominate the current approach to international assistance. First, many aid providers have shifted from response toward prevention, with the intention of addressing systemic problems and promoting local ownership. Secondly, they have adopted business principles and practices, based on a sense that improving the efficiency of aid delivery will inevitably improve its effectiveness. These two trends embody and operationalize the theory of change that drives today's international assistance: ***By efficiently providing tangible and intangible inputs, international actors can effectively cause, catalyze or support positive economic, social and political change in other countries***. But is this the right theory of change?

1. Effects on the Aid's Processes

A focus on delivery shapes the entire aid process, starting with an emphasis on what is missing and needs to be supplied. Meeting a need, however, does not necessarily solve the problem that produces this need. Similarly, when aid providers make plans without the involvement of people on the ground, their assistance can ignore local priorities and undermine existing capacities. A focus on delivery also brings a focus on growth, speed and spending. Aid agencies have come to equate effectiveness with growth and efficiency with "timeliness," which are often only indicators of spending capability.

> "What impact are you talking about? The impact is just spending money. Goods are delivered with no sense of social development. There is no interest to develop people; it's all reduced to practicality. Just know how to write a report. The focus is on skills put in the framework of outputs with no reflection included." *Director of a local NGO in Lebanon*

2. Effects on Aid Providers and Recipients

The emphasis on delivery also distorts the values, priorities and relationships of people involved in aid efforts. The need to prove effectiveness in the fundraising marketplace causes donors and aid agencies to focus on quantifiable, easily-documented results. Much aid is then channeled through local partners, who are often treated as "middlemen," caught between donor demands and community priorities. People in recipient societies subsequently become askers rather than doers, and develop skills focused on getting the most aid they can.

3. Effects on Purposes of Aid

If the purpose of international assistance is to help people to the point that they no longer need it, then those providing assistance should essentially be working themselves of out a job. Instead, the "aid industry' is growing, with the incentive structures driving increased competition amid calls for greater coordination and collaboration. The pressures on each organization to differentiate their work from that of other aid providers undermines joint analysis, and can lead to a duplication of aid efforts. People in recipient communities in every location said that, instead of being in the business of delivery, aid providers should be "present." Presence, it became clear, is a shorthand way that people on the receiving side of international assistance express the great distance that they feel from aid providers and their decision-making processes.

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

1. How have you seen the two trends—the shift from response toward prevention and addressing root causes, and the adoption of business principles—manifest in your organization? What are the pros and cons of each?

2. Does your work reflect the current delivery-focused theory of change? What aspects of this theory of change do you think are adequate? Inadequate?

3. How has the delivery model for international aid influenced the way you and other organizations work? Have you seen alternative models for aid? If so, how have they worked?

4. While corporations depend on the satisfaction of their clients for survival, aid agencies depend on donors to whom they "sell" their projects to provide aid. How do you ensure that aid recipients are happy with your assistance? How do you hear and act on their feedback? What happens when that feedback conflicts with a donor's priorities or needs?

5. According to *Time to Listen*, "Unless the problem is solved and existing capacities strengthened, the need may well rise again. For a business, this idea makes sense—repeat customers provide a steady revenue base. But for international aid agencies, a needs focus perpetuates dependency rather than supporting self-determination." How do you build on existing capacities? Are you meeting "needs" in a way that will guarantee your assistance will always be "needed"?

6. People in recipient communities universally said that, instead of being in the business of delivery, aid providers should be "present," noting that if "donors spent time with us," they would "understand our realities" and "provide appropriate things." How do you balance this desire for presence with the push for local ownership? How do you know if your presence is sufficient (or too much)?

7. What pressures do you feel to continue growing your organization and to spend funds in a timely manner? What are the benefits and consequences of an emphasis on efficiency?

8. How do you monitor and evaluate your work? Do you focus on what has been done or what has happened because of what was done? How are you accountable for the intended and unintended impacts and long-term effects of your assistance?

Chapter 5 – Donor Policies, Donor Agendas

The policy context for aid is largely set by international donors - both governments and INGOs -who view policies as an important tool for shaping aid and ensuring its effectiveness. Though many people in recipient societies share the donors' desire for results, they see flaws in policies that are driven by donors' agendas, often in ways that undermine their original intent and create resentment. *They identify three areas where donor policies, decided by those at the "top" and applied across all aid-receiving contexts, do not work:*

1. Who Gets Aid

The policy determination of who gets aid often ranks "need" secondary to donor country agendas. The media's influence can also play a role in affecting some donor priorities, as they often bring attention to disasters and other crises, while bypassing places affected by chronic poverty or long-term conflict. In war-torn areas, prioritizing those suffering from conflict means that the communities who manage to maintain peace are often overlooked, creating perverse incentives for those seeking assistance. Well-intended aid can also cause counterproductive impacts in cases of refugee returns or political isolation of disfavored regimes.

2. Mismatch with Local Priorities

> "Why do a needs assessment if the agenda is already decided?" *Palestinian NGO staff, Lebanon*

In the eyes of many, donors pursue their agendas and priorities in recipient countries without meaningful consultation with aid recipients. Even though donors have increasingly adopted principles and policies to integrate aid efforts with recipient country planning, these have not been consistently translated into changed donor behaviors. Donor policies still appear to be top-down impositions, backed by funding that is only available if the project aligns with their priorities.

3. Shifting and Changing Priorities

> "If you ask me what my priority needs are and I tell you, but then you bring me other things instead, I will take them, but you did not help me." *Farmer in Mali*

The freedom and frequency with which donors introduce new policies and shift funding allocations to pursue new agendas is disruptive and counterproductive. Ever-changing donor "fads" undermines both sustainability and local control. People in recipient countries want external engagement and funding support that they can rely on for long enough to achieve planned results. They describe how they make projects fit into categories that they think can get donor funding based on the current donor agendas instead of pursuing their own goals and strategies. They are often "caught in the middle" between the local community's vision and donor agendas, over which they have little control.

What Does It All Add Up To?

People in aid-recipient countries accept that donors own political environments will shape their policies, but assert that this does not excuse aid for being ineffective. Donors themselves speak of the policy-program gap and seek ways to overcome it. People in aid-recipient societies want the opportunity to talk about the various agendas that drive international action in their countries, and to work together to tailor broad policies to local contexts.

> "We got all this aid because the village was 'multiethnic.' The NGOs were fulfilling their own conditions. To get aid, not only does your community have to have many ethnic groups, they have to have problems with each other too!" *Shop owners in Kosovo*

1. Government donors operate at two policy levels. As national entities spending taxpayers' money, they are first expected to support and pursue their own government's foreign policy agendas. At a second level, donor governments enact operational policies that set priorities for the values and principles their aid is intended to promote. Have you seen these kinds of discrepancies between donor country policies and recipient country priorities? How could these be reconciled?

2. Have you experienced a situation in which the intent of a donor's policy was undermined by the way it was implemented or ended up creating counterproductive impacts? How did that happen and why?

3. *Time to Listen* shares one particularly poignant story of a woman who received food only for one HIV/AIDS-infected granddaughter, while her other orphaned grandchildren went hungry, since humanitarian aid was only available for those who tested HIV positive. What donor decisions about how to allocate assistance (and to whom) have affected your work? How can you, as an aid organization, mitigate these effects if/when they happen?

4. The Listening Project Report from Ecuador states, "Some of the goals arise from external visions: improving living conditions, fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals, combating poverty, democratization, building of self-sufficiency, etc. Local visions are often less utopian and more practical because they confront the 'how' of a complex situation." How do you balance high-level goals with on-the-ground practicality?

5. Have you seen significant shifts in donor policies? How did that affect your work? If a new agenda no longer reflected your priorities, how did you react and/or adapt? Why did you make that decision?

6. How do you think aid could be made more effective, given the political environments in which donors and aid agencies operate?

Chapter 6 – The Proceduralization of International Assistance: A Distorting Influence

> "This is how the verb 'to participate' is conjugated: I participate. You participate. They decide." *A businessman and grassroots development worker in Ecuador*

Aid providers and recipients both talk about how many of the procedures developed to translate policies into practices "take too much time," are "inflexible," "too complicated," or "counterproductive." This "proceduralization" means that the values and principles that the procedures were intended to enable are often lost. While in theory, many procedures are intended to support good practices, in reality they tend to fail in *three key areas: participation, ownership, and sustainability; equitableness; and mutual accountability*.

1. Participation, Ownership, and Sustainability

Because of the linkage of these three principles, any procedure that negatively affects one will have far-reaching consequences on the others. For example, implementing agencies are often forced by donors to finalize the details of a project before staff are able to speak directly with recipients, leaving little room for their meaningful participation. When local people are invited to voice their opinions, it is usually in the form of a survey or needs assessment. Instead of providing an outlet for the contribution of original ideas, these surveys ask people to respond to pre-determined perceptions of their needs, instead of engaging them in a true dialogue about their capacities, needs and priorities.

2. Equitableness

Aid agencies follow standardized procedures not only in how they determine what kinds of assistance to provide, but also in determining to whom to provide this assistance. Unfortunately, the distribution of aid often depends more on the priorities of the agency than on the needs and priorities of the community. Whenever communities are directly consulted about projects, the final decisions made by the agency are rarely conveyed back to the community, which can lead to perceptions of unfairness.

3. Mutual Accountability

"Both donors and recipients are committed to the principle of accountability. But donors rely heavily on report-writing as their primary mechanism of accountability. Aid recipients around the world agree that the monitoring and reporting process focuses too little on qualitative results, is overly complicated, often does not represent the truth. All of the time spent in front of computers ultimately sends the message that agency staff care more about writing reports to their donors than achieving actual results and being accountable to communities for them.

Three factors emerged that point to the problems that proceduralization generates: 1) The location and timing of many decision are undermining the very principles aid provides seek to pursue. 2) The tendency of donors to support projects through relatively limited funding cycles limits the ability of aid agencies to focus on these principles 3) The focus of decisions and funding on the delivery of goods and services—with less attention to process—gets in the way of achieving development principles.

"There is no interest to develop people; it is all reduced to practicality. Just know how to write a report. The focus is on skills put into the framework of outputs with no reflection included." *Director of a Local NGO in Lebanon*

1. What are some examples of inflexible procedures built into the operations of the organizations you have worked with? How have these affected your work and relationships? How could the procedures have been changed to preserve the intent but to allow for more flexibility?

2. What are some examples of participatory procedures you have observed in your previous development experience? Did these procedures allow for meaningful participation in decision-making processes?

3. Many aid recipients report that the attitudes of international staff often discourage participation during consultation meetings. Have you seen this? How can facilitators change their approach to encourage more direct engagement by participants?

4. The distribution of aid is often deemed to be unfair by recipients because the rationale behind this distribution is rarely communicated. How do you communicate decisions about who receives aid to the broader community? How transparent do you feel your organization is? What are the constraints on transparency?

5. Has your organization ever shared an assessment, proposal or report with a recipient community? If so, how? If no, why not? How would you share information with a community that has a high level of illiteracy or doesn't read the language the report was written in?

6. The proceduralization of international assistance is said to provide perverse incentives for aid recipients. In one example, a young man from Ecuador says that local gang members have less incentive to change their lives because they only receive assistance as long as they remain gang members. How might the procedures for aid distribution be altered to avoid such counterproductive incentives?

7. The project cycle of international development work is thought to create a short- sightedness on the part of aid agency staff, who can be more concerned with individual project deadlines than sustainable results. In this sense, even a project that meets all of its goals and timelines can have a very limited impact in the long-term. Think of an example of a successful project you have been a part of in the past. What procedures helped to ensure its success, and what procedures did you feel you had to work around to ensure success?

Chapter 7 – International Assistance in Partnership with Governments and Civil Society

People in recipient communities feel strongly that international assistance should connect to and strengthen local structures, and they are highly critical of aid that bypasses the government and/or civil society. At the same time, people express concerns that the way these partnerships are managed have severe limitations and, sometimes, negative effects. More effective partnerships require a good understanding of the context, and of power dynamics within it.

1. Partnerships with Governments

> "Start from the point of respect for locals at all levels—from the national down. Consult with them. Don't go into an area as if you know everything. International organizations need to converse with local players for guidance to seek clarification of where to go and how to deliver aid. This results in appropriate assistance. First listen and learn, then act."
> *Community leader in the Philippines*

One key lesson learned from the Listening Project is that context matters in determining how best to work alongside local and national governments. In many places, people have very little confidence in the government's commitment to promoting human welfare. People frequently report instances where aid money is siphoned off by government officials or used by politicians to maintain support and power. When aid agencies are not careful about when and how they work with government institutions, recipients often assume that the agencies are complicit in such activities. Government officials in recipient societies also comment on the history of distrust and the intrinsic inequality between donors and recipients, and that they often feel unable to affect the dynamics of their relationships with aid providers.

2. Partnerships with Civil Society

Local context and inequality also influence relationships between aid agencies and civil society, whose institutions are a product of local history and culture in much the same way governments and politicians are. Many in aid recipient countries view the relationship between donors and civil society as mirroring that of a company and its middlemen: local agencies are merely given the task of distributing aid rather than being afforded an active role in the decision making process. Because of this one-sided dynamic, many people believe that these local "middlemen" are wasting resources and should be bypassed. Therefore, instead of strengthening the role of civil society in recipient communities, , donors and aid agencies are effectively reducing civil society organizations to "agents" of aid without any real impact on the process.

In spite of the difficulties with donor-government partnerships, people both within and outside of these governments feel that aid providers have a responsibility to connect with existing governance structures. People have observed, for instance, that when aid bypasses public institutions, governments do not take ownership of aid programs and are less likely to continue work after the agency leaves. Civil society can also gain from continued partnerships with international agencies, but only if the nature of these relationships is made more equal and collaborative. The commentary of people on the receiving end of aid makes clear that partnerships are not just mechanisms for accomplishing donor purposes. Instead, developing healthy partnerships could be and should be a direct objective of effective aid.

*"If you leave resource allocation up to the Lebanese government, everything is politicized, everything is politically driven, and everything is communal." **Member of Parliament in Lebanon***

*"A project society has been developed, not a civil society." **Researcher and policy advisor in Kosovo***

1. When aid agencies pick and choose which governments to work with, they tend to partner primarily with governments in good international standing, while shunning the people living under corrupt or failing regimes. How can international assistance continue to support good governance while also serving those living under poor governance?

2. What has your experience been working with local or national government? What challenges were encountered and how did you manage them? What opportunities did that open up?

3. What effect does bypassing local government and/or civil society organizations have on the sustainability of international assistance?

4. Should developing a healthy partnership with local institutions be a means to an end, or a direct objective of aid? Why or why not?

5. Many recipients of aid view local civil society organizations as "middlemen" that simply use up resources before they have a chance to reach community members. Others consider it a mistake when aid agencies bypass local organizations and interact directly with beneficiaries. How do you work with civil society organizations? What have the benefits and challenges been? How could these relationships be more productive and sustainable?

6. Explain the phrase, "Trust does not exclude control." How can aid agencies monitor the performance of local institutions without creating the impression that the agency does not trust them to work in the best interest of the community?

7. Inequality in partnerships is one of the most common reasons for the breakdown of relationships between aid agencies and local institutions. Reflect on the power dynamics between you and a local partner (whether government or civil society). How has that influenced the decisions that are made around the project? What changes could be made to change (or mitigate the effects of) these power dynamics?

Chapter 8 – Corruption: A Surprisingly Broad Definition

When international agencies provide resources that government authorities could use for personal gain, they are seen to be reinforcing political systems that their own citizens mistrust. Aside from theft or diversion of material aid, people reported that family or clan group favoritism can also lead to unequal distribution of aid, sometimes excluding needy recipients from benefiting.

While people tend to report a sense of resigned frustration over corruption in their societies, they often critique aid agencies for not doing more to leverage their privileged status to break corrupt patterns. Their perceptions of corruption often go beyond its commonly used definition—*abuse of entrusted power for personal gain*—to encompass various aspects of ineffective distribution of aid resources.

1. No Effective Accountability

"Politicians use aid for their preferences because they get to decide who the beneficiaries are and they get to include their friends or family members, even if they aren't qualified for the aid."
Teacher in the Philippines

Aid recipients express frustration that they are unable to hold aid agencies accountable for the impacts and cumulative effects of aid efforts. Distributing funds and then showing little concern for what happens to them, for instance, is a subtle form of corruption because it often leads to waste. Many people also describe how easy it is to fake numbers in reports or even receipts. They fault aid organizations for caring more about whether reports are submitted with the "right" attachments than whether they accurately communicate what has actually occurred. The resulting message, they add, is that donors must not really care about what happens to funds.

2. Misuse and Extravagance

People in aid-recipient countries are also troubled by ostentatious spending on staff (salaries, fringe benefits, housing, etc.) and on expensive hotels and restaurants for conferences. If funds are meant to help poor people, then why do staff members receive so much? Some say it seems like aid benefits the providers more than the recipients.

3. Too Much Aid, Too Quickly

Local actors and some international staff also describe situations where pushing too much aid into communities too fast results in the misuse of resources. Ministry officials in Afghanistan, for instance, shared a story about a donor who needed to spend money quickly before the upcoming end of the fiscal year. Instead of sending money to communities in installments and requiring some funds to be raised locally, the money was transferred upfront in bulk, and—as program staff had predicted—quickly disappeared.

4. What People Say Should Be Done

The Listening Project reports share substantial evidence that the current top-down attempts to counter theft and other misuses along the aid delivery chain are often ineffective. Putting more staff on the ground to follow up on program outcomes would not only help with "policing" traditional forms of corruption, such as outright theft, but would also send the message that outsiders are committed to working with aid recipients to affect genuine progress. Aid recipients would similarly like to work as a team with providers to track the allocation and use of aid.

> "All I see are people coming in with big cars ... the only thing is talking, meetings, and rumors of an NGO holding functions. So where does the money go?" *Hotel guard in Kenya*

1. How do you define corruption? What do the members of the communities in which you work consider to be corruption? How does this vary across socioeconomic, gender, and occupational differences?

2. To what extent are perceptions of corruption grounded in actual wrongdoing versus misunderstanding or lack of transparency?

3. What societal mechanisms (legal, cultural, etc.) exist in the places you work as a check on corruption? When are they effective, and when are they ineffective? How do they interface with your work?

4. Are there systems of corruption that affect the communities in which you work? How do you learn about them and address them? Do you do anything that may unintentionally enable corrupt practices?

5. How reliable are your organization's accountability mechanisms? If aid recipients were frustrated by real or perceived corruption in your work, how would you know?

6. Do aid recipients perceive your organization as spending lavishly on staff? How do you know? How do you balance pressures to attract talented staff and keep overhead low?

Chapter 9 – Informing and Communicating: Necessary But Not Sufficient

> "If we understand, then we can be patient." *Listening Project participant in Indonesia*

Community members that are well-informed feel respected and able to participate more effectively. Understanding ongoing projects allows them to hold aid providers and their local partners accountable for the way money is spent. However, aid recipients often express frustration about the inadequacy of communication efforts, *specifying three areas in particular*:

1. Selection criteria: People want to understand why some individuals and groups are selected for assistance and others are not. Aid-targeting criteria can seem confusing and inconsistent, often creating tensions in communities.

2. Project goals and timeframes: Understanding the rationale behind assistance is essential for people to get involved with and support aid efforts. In some cases, individuals assume the worst when the facts related to a project are not clear.

3. Funding allocations: People want to know how much money is being spent, where it goes, who receives it, and what it is accomplishing. Without clear information on funding, people often suspect corruption, particularly when their expectations exceed the visible results.

When aid recipients are asked to explain why they are uninformed about the aid agencies or projects in their communities, they suggest three reasons:

1. No effort is expended: Some aid providers don't invest any time or effort to share information. As one ministry official in Timor-Leste commented, "Some advisors don't want to share knowledge. They just sit in front of computers, writing reports."

> "When so many people know the project, no one can manipulate it or do corruption. The information is open to everyone." *A woman in Timor-Leste*

2. The wrong people get the information: People say that aid providers should understand how community structures limit information flows and tailor communication efforts to account for these bottlenecks. While aid agency staff do commonly seek to share information by meeting with a village chief or other local representative, all too often these intermediaries serve as gatekeepers and fail to share information with the wider community.

3. The wrong approach is taken: Differences in communication styles and cultural practices can also inhibit effective communication between aid providers and recipients. In some cultures, for instance, people express disagreements gently, causing foreign aid workers accustomed to direct discussion to miss the true meaning or feelings expressed. At other times, international staff may be overly cautious about cultural sensitivity and miss opportunities to speak with certain people or groups.

In general, people suggest that aid agencies should make a point of talking to a broad range of community members, "going off the main road" to reach people who may be marginalized by typical communication channels, and at the same time making sure to create two-way communication channels that allow for continuous dialogue.

"For sure, international aid has done much good, especially in terms of infrastructure and training the people, but we don't know what its goals are because they don't speak to us clearly. That's why we imagine negative things." ***Former Provincial Councilor in Ecuador***

1. What should the local community understand about your organization and your work in their community? What do you currently communicate and how?

2. Many organizations track the number of people information is distributed to, but do not always track how well individuals understand or use that information. When you communicate what you think is important, what evidence do you have that people are able to understand and use the information?

3. Who does your organization reach with your communication efforts? Who do you not reach? What are the implications of these "communication gaps"?

4. Map out how information is shared in the communities in which you work. What parts of your map are based on assumptions, and what do you have evidence for?

5. What opportunities does your organization create to engage in two-way conversations with individuals or groups? What are the opportunities for and barriers to sustaining conversations as part of your program activities?

6. Do you receive critical questions or feedback from aid recipients about how your organization operates? If not, why? If so, how is that feedback interpreted and taken into account by your organization?

Chapter 10 – Obstacles to Meaningful Engagement

Aid providers express a desire to thoughtfully and meaningfully engage with the communities they serve in order to encourage collaboration and joint problem-solving. They list, however, five common obstacles that make meaningful engagement difficult:

1. Engagement Requires Time

According to aid agency staff, a greater emphasis is placed on complying with donor requirements and timelines than engaging thoughtfully with the communities in which they serve. Agencies focus more on speed and efficiency than the quality of relationships with aid recipients, and rigid reporting requirements do not enable meaningful engagement. Staff recognize the need for time to listen and to work directly with communities. The problem within the current aid system is that there is simply not enough time to complete both donor and administrative requirements in addition to building relationships with recipient communities.

2. Engagement Requires Access and Presence

The inability to physically reach certain communities restricts an aid agency's ability to truly understand the capacities, needs, and context of that community. This affects the ways in which an organization prioritizes and conducts its work. Common obstacles to access are security concerns (real or perceived), lack of accessibility (road quality, remoteness), and community perceptions of an aid agency's politics or agendas.

3. Engagement Requires Resources

> "Presence takes time and money. Presence requires openness and humility. Presence involves prioritizing time and resources and delineating roles and responsibilities between levels (outsider, insider, stakeholders of various sorts)." *International Aid Worker in Denmark*

In order to ensure effective and meaningful engagement, money is needed to pay for staff time spent in the field. Aid providers need to be able to stay long enough to listen and respond, while communities also need to invest their time and resources to support project activities. Aid agencies sometimes provide monetary contributions to encourage community participation, but it often results in dependency or creates a situation where people will only participate if there is financial compensation.

4. Engaging People Effectively Requires Specific Skills

In order to be effective in engaging people in recipient communities, aid providers need to know how to listen, how to facilitate problem solving, and how to manage conflict. Nurturing collaborative approaches to planning and decision-making requires people with relevant skills and a real interest in the people and politics of the communities they serve.

5. Engagement Needs to be Measured and Valued

Many of the dimensions of engagement—the quality of relationships, levels of trust, equity in decision-making, and ownership—are not easy to measure. It is important to measure quality, not just quantity. Assessments of how effectively aid providers engage with their communities should be used to evaluate staff, partners, programs, and impact.

"What I like about our donor is that they like to learn from us. They say they learn a lot from our seminars and our process. In order to do that, they spend time with us and participate in these discussions. A donor is a true partner if they are listening to us. If they listen and learn they will accompany you and won't dictate. We share an understanding: we are in this together. A lot more is possible then." *Director of a local NGO in the Philippines*

1. Within your organization, what types of activities consume the most amount of time? How much time is allotted for *meaningful* community engagement per month?

2. How much of your organization's budget is allotted to activities that promote community engagement? Do you think adjustments can and should be made to divert resources to or from community engagement activities?

3. What do you see as your organization's obstacles to meaningful engagement?
   Can your organization overcome any of these obstacles? If so, what specific actions can be taken to listen and engage more effectively with those you mean to support?

4. A community development expert said "We shouldn't be asking whether communities are participating enough in our projects, but whether we are participating enough in the community's projects". How do you see "participation" play out in your organization? Are there ways to improve community participation that reduce or eliminate negative effects, such as dependence and insincere motivations for participation?

5. Does your organization have listening, collaboration, and conflict-resolution trainings/workshops/resources for staff? If not, could your organization benefit from these? Does your organization have access to such resources?

6. Do you currently have metrics for community engagement? How would you improve/create measurements to properly evaluate the level and quality of community engagement?

Chapter 11 – Conclusion: Acting on What We Have Heard

1. Defining the Problem

Many of those living in countries that receive international assistance agree that aid is a good thing, but still believe there are issues in the way it is currently provided. Problems such as dependency, an increase in intergroup tensions, distrust, disrespect, and wasting of resources are all observed as negative consequences of this flawed system. Similarly, the current system generally focuses on gaps that need to be filled rather than on existing capacities and structures that should be reinforced, making the aid delivery system supply-driven rather than based on local priorities. What people in recipient countries want is a system that supports indigenous processes so that outside aid will eventually become unnecessary.

2. A New Paradigm

Many aid providers and aid recipients agree that the paradigm of the international assistance system needs to change fundamentally. What people want is a system that integrates the capacities and assets of insiders with the resources and experiences of outsiders and that enables shared decisions about the best strategies for creating desired changes.

3. Elements of Two Paradigms: A Comparison

Externally Driven Aid Delivery System	Collaborative Aid System
Local people seen as beneficiaries and aid recipients	Local people seen as colleagues and drivers of their own development
Focus on identifying needs	Focus on supporting/reinforcing capacities and identifying local priorities
Pre-planned/pre-determined programs	Context-relevant programs developed jointly by recipient communities and aid providers
Provider-driven decision-making	Collaborative decision-making
Focus on spending on a pre-determined schedule	Fit money and timing to strategy and realities on the ground
Staff evaluated and rewarded for managing projects on time and on budget	Staff evaluated and rewarded for quality of relationships and results that recipients say make lasting positive changes in their lives
Monitoring and evaluation by providers on project spending and delivery of planned assistance	Monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up by providers and recipients on the results and long-term effects of assistance
Focus on growth	Planned draw-down and mutually agreed exit/end of assistance strategy

This alternative collaborative approach follows a new Theory of Change: *The role of international assistance in promoting positive social, political, and economic change in the countries where it is offered is to expand the range of options that people in that society can consider, to engage with them in weighing the costs and benefits of each option, and from this, to co-develop and co-implement a joint strategy for pursuing the changes they seek.*

To begin this paradigm shift, aid providers can look at the primary instruments of international assistance that are in their control: **policies, procedures, resources, and people:**

- They can focus and simplify their policies and procedures on ways to truly engage local people every step of the way and particularly in the decisions that will affect their lives.
- They can rethink how they allocate resources to ensure that they really do understand the local context and are investing in and collaborating in meaningful ways with local people and institutions so that they can drive the process and achieve their own development.
- They can redefine the critical attributes and credentials they value in themselves and in those they hire and work with to ensure that they can meaningfully engage and collaborate with those they aim to support.

The Listening Project found that every story of effective aid told by aid recipients included a description of particular *people* who worked in ways that developed *respect and trust* with those they were trying to support. Over and over again, people talked about how much people and good leadership really matter.

Because aid agencies develop their own policies and procedures, decide how they will allocate resources, and define the skills that are important to their work, they can change them. And they can start doing this right now.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 11

> "The phrase 'paradigm shift' is scary for many people. It calls into question everything they are doing and they think they have to start from scratch, relearn everything, and all their hard-won experience is irrelevant. In fact, it is precisely the hard-won experience that prompts the shift. No paradigm shift is possible without people experimenting around the edges of a system to see if they can shore up the sections that are collapsing. It is these experiments that show the way toward the new paradigm. It is these experiments that need to be brought from the edges to the center of the profession. In other words, every reader knows enough to start the paradigm shift today."
> *International program director in the USA*

1. In your current or past experience, can you think of an example when your organization did not collaborate effectively with people in the recipient country or community? What were the mistakes made and how did you learn from them?

2. Can you think of an example when your organization collaborated well with people in the recipient country or community? What were the results? What were the main reasons for success?

3. What are the qualities you look for when hiring the staff responsible for engaging with people in recipient communities? After reading the results of the Listening Project, how would you change the way you value those qualities?

4. Do you agree with the new paradigm and theory of change for international aid that was described above? If so, why? If not, how would you modify it?

5. Look at the table that defines a collaborative approach to aid. How much of this collaborative paradigm do you see reflected in your work? Do you believe your organization could be more collaborative in its approach, and if so, how?

6. In your career, what is a practical change you personally can make to integrate a more collaborative approach into your work and/or the work of those you supervise?

7. What changes can your organization make in its policies and procedures to promote collaboration with local communities before aid programs are planned and throughout the process?

8. What are the challenges you foresee in implementing changes to your current aid model? Can you think of steps you or your organization can take to overcome those challenges?

The Importance of Listening

The international aid system needs to fundamentally change if it is to be more effective. The people who are engaged in providing aid at every level are the key to these systemic changes. Policies can be rewritten to require collaboration and joint design of programs, procedures can be simplified to allow for meaningful engagement with community members and program participants, and funders can modify their requirements to encourage a collaborative system that reduces waste and corruption.

If we did nothing else to improve the aid system, the very act of adding regular occasions and opportunities to listen to people with whom we work, and to let them know that their ideas and judgments are valued, would by itself bring a shift in the relationship of aid providers with aid recipients. Throughout the Listening Project, team members were thanked for asking questions, and for once, actually listening to the answers. In fact, many people commented on the uniqueness of this experience. As one of the listening participants stated, we should "take a deep breath" in the midst of our reporting and funding deadlines. We should, in short, listen to what people have to say. To do so is fascinating; it is also helpful. And it is the responsible and respectful thing to do.