



**Thought Leaders in Learning:
Time to Listen:
Hearing People on the Receiving End of
International Aid**

Q & A Transcript

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Female: Thank you very much. Excellent. Very interesting and raises a lot of questions and I'm sure people here have other questions. We are scheduled to go to 11:30. Is that correct? Okay and I just – before we get into the questions, I just want to mention Dana is available to continue the conversation. If people are interested in a conversation or a consultation with Dana afterward, you can sign up with Alejandra in the back.

Okay. Questions?

Audience: Hi, I'm Yin Cheken, and I'm with PPL. So my question is who are the donors that are doing the best job and what is it about what they're doing right that USAID can emulate?

Female: Should we take a couple at once or not?

Female: Sure.

Audience: Hi, my name is David Hassleman. I'm also with the Policy Planning and Learning Bureau and Aid. Starting out in 1978, when I first – '77, when I first saw my first development project these kinds of ideas have been prominent and very interesting. Right now and for some time, the U.S. foreign assistance programs have been heavily indicated and controlled by legislative earmarks or indications, things like that.

How does that work in the reality of U.S. foreign assistance funding?

Audience: Hi, My name's Matt Ettman. I'm with ICF International. Thanks to all the acronyms for putting this one. I have a kind of related question. Some of the reasons for this evidence based approach is impact evaluation, a lot of it drawing on methodologies from medicine and other areas is a very – it takes a long time to develop that, but it also is based on the need to justify this to other parts outside of the traditional aid system, USAID partners but also to legislators and the public itself. And so how do we shift the paradigm outside of just the aid community?

Audience: Hi.

Female: Sure, sure. So on the question on the donors and sort of who is doing the best job and why, we explicitly did not aim to try to compare. Actually, part of our approach to collaborative learning is to bring a lot of people that are working in the same field, together to learn to together and not – and to try to break down some of those competitive barriers and to be willing to share the successes and the failures in a way knowing, at the end, they're not going to be sort of named and shamed.

I think that, what we did find, though is, from the community's perspective, there are organizations that have taken this longer term approach, that have spent the time really – and fund the time, upfront, that is needed to allow communities to be more engaged in – really throughout the process.

And I know one of the more positive examples we heard about was in Ethiopia. We went back to a – we were in a community where the aid agency had left seven years before, and people were still raving about the approach that they took and sort of how they'd taken them through this process of development, how they had worked with them. Didn't spend money for quite some time until they had developed their plans, worked with them many years with their part – the community's contribution increasing over time.

They're not – it's not rocket science, and there are actually a lot of methods that many of us know, but they were able to do that. And I think one of the issues is actually around these restrictions that are put in place, and I think that part of the problem is that we have these very short timeframes. And I think we need to do a better job of educating the American public and of educating Congress about what it really takes, that we don't expect to achieve the major changes, in our own society, in three years or in five years. This is an ongoing process, and so how is what we're able to provide fitting into that long term process of change and looking at what can we do to actually change and simply some of the legislation.

And I think – I mean one the earmarking and the – a lot of – there's a lot of guidance. I know that you all have to deal with a lot of things that Congress sort of mandates, but the way that you do that and the guidance and the procedures that are put in place are often determined internally, so there's some flexibility, other ways to achieve what Congress wants and intends but in a simpler way, in a more respectful way. And what can we do to educate Congress?

I mean I would love to, frankly, get all of them passports and make sure everybody goes out and spends a week or two in the field, not on a dog and pony show but really out talking to people, and they would probably have a very different conception of what development is all about and about our – the challenges and how to do this more effectively.

And I think that we sometimes don't take on that challenge of – and I know that there are restrictions on USAID staff and that, but you've got – there are ways that we can do that, and I think all of us, that are in this – sorry – need to take responsibility for educating and discussing what this endeavor really is about and acknowledging that it's not all going to come

from project funding. A lot of time, it's actually policy changes that are needed as well.

On the impact evaluations and sort of – and how to justify. I mean I think the same thing that most of our Congress and the public want to see that the aid that we provide is making a difference, and we're often put under pressure to have success stories. But I think we also need to have those kind of challenging stories, again, for people to understand that it's not A plus B equals C, that this is a complex process that we – and I think one of the issues is that our aid is only one piece in achieving a lot of the goals that we're intending and that all those sort of other factors have a role to play.

And that's not to say it's an excuse for our aid being ineffective but looking at what are the other – the effects. I think this issue around impact is so much focus on the impact of a project, and it really isn't looking at whether – we have lots of really good projects, but they may not be adding up to actually getting to the changes. There's a lot of assumptions about how things are linked, and often, they are not, or what follows on and often those things don't.

And so the initial impact that we might have said we'd claimed doesn't last, and so it is this issue of how long do we turn – how long do we consider for measuring impact? And I think another piece of that is really working with people in communities to define the impact that they want to see not just the impact that we want to see.

They have agendas. They have priorities. They have goals, and they know that we're coming in from the outside with those as well. What they want is this honest discussion of what it is you want to achieve, what it is we want to achieve and can we find a happy balance?

Audience:

Hi. Thanks, Dana, for your presentation. I'm Kirby Reiling from the Office of Conflict Management Mitigation at USAID, and I was pleased to hear you mention the aid effectiveness agenda, the development effectiveness agenda because that's very much on some of our minds.

But you mentioned it mostly in terms of handoff, but it strikes me that a lot of the other principles that you outlined are things that could be the way that governments themselves, a way that they administer social services, add extension and also that we're increasingly thinking, in aid, about how to mainstream issues of democracy and governance throughout service delivery and other forms of aid and so how might you apply these sort of different paradigm to working with and through governments for development rather than just USAID project providers and activities.

Male:

I'm actually going to take some questions. We have over 100 people online that are also asking questions, so I represent the large voice back here. So you can give me dirty looks, but I'm going to ask several questions at once.

So we had – so just, for instance, we had over 100 people online from Tunisia, London, Barbados, Nepal, the East Africa Mission, and I'm going to try to synchronize their questions into a few main points, and there are a lot of questions.

Dana, you just mentioned, in your comments, about impacts and the need to measure relationships, and a lot of comments online – we were having a discussion going the whole time – comments revolved around the system is set up not to be able to measure impacts. Who is going to go back and do impact evaluations, five, ten years after a project ends? How do we incorporate measuring impact and what models do you see out there that can effectively do qualitative evaluation – impact evaluations?

And then a second series of comments were around participatory and collaborative approaches and stakeholders are not monolithic. How do donors balance a situation where your stakeholders have various inputs of what's needed and what needs to be changed? And the *[break in audio]* going to have to make a decision and be the one that is seen as making the decision because there's not a common need that comes out of participatory approach. And the second part of that is what models came out of the listening project that found participatory approaches working well? And that's it from the internet for now.

Audience:

Thank you. I am _____, student at John Hopkins _____ and also working at International Fund for Agricultural Development. I'm from Kosovo, so I'm actually looking forward to reading the book, and I'm sure there are examples from there as well.

I just had a short question, I guess, just asking for your opinion. I work for _____ Kosovo with projects with the European union on agriculture, and I definitely agree that the short term approach, not just from you but many other donors, really hampers the long term, sustainable development of the country, and also, in effect it exacerbates the continuation of projects because I saw that a project lasts two years and then there's a one year gap and then another slew of the different technical assistant experts come in, and they spend a lot of time seeing, okay, what has been done. And that's just a waste of time, but what about political _____ because, in many case, it might take time, when working with the government and different ministries.

It might take time for them to warm up to an idea or if it seems too radical that some proposed change to be done in any different sector. So how do you ensure that you give them enough time but, at the same time, you're not expending indefinitely and not ____ what you mentioned earlier?
Thanks.

Female:

Should we – I think I'll stop there. Is that okay? So great, thanks, Kirby. You're right. On many of the – in these – on the Busan and all of these aid effectiveness agreements, we're signed by the partner country governments as much as the donor governments.

And I think what's interesting is that monitoring that was done, prior to Busan, showed that most of the partner – many partner governments had actually made far more progress on their commitments than donors had pretty paltry results, actually, if you read the studies.

And I think that it – definitely, these things can and should apply to how governments deliver services themselves, and I think it can be a starting point for a conversation. And so what I hear – but we heard both from government officials, from local organizations, in communities, at all levels that they wanted to have a different kind of dialogue. They wanted to have a discussion and not have it be seen as this imposition. “We're coming in. We expect you to hold up these standards,” when they know that the people sitting across the table from them aren't even doing it themselves.

And so a really honest dialogue and these principles provide a foundation for that, they can, and to say – and how do we hold each other accountable for trying to achieve them? And I think that that – there's a whole chapter in the book on working with governments and working with civil society, and there's not a clear thing. There's not a clear conclusion of either. You need to work with both, and there are good people in – even in bad governments, and there are good people in bad civil society organizations. And the trick is finding those people and those parts of the government that you can work with, that want to change, that are trying to do the work and really supporting them. It's kind of the positive deviance approach, if you will.

And we're using those principles that we have all signed onto as a way to have those conversations. And being honest and, frankly, humble about what we can and can't change. I think that, a lot of times, people, outside of Washington, have really don't understand the Washington sort of – the whole discussion and the constraints here, and so sometimes, it's explaining where you do and you don't have flexibility. But people just don't even know that because no one even bothers to tell them or tell them why decisions have been made.

In terms of the system not being set up to do impact evaluation, I think it's true. In terms of models of qualitative impact evaluations, there's a lot – there's actually a growing interest, in this area, of sort of storytelling and of gathering of perceptions, of listening to views, and I think it's a combination of you can statistically look at what's changing in terms of health and other kinds of indicators, but you need to combine that with the qualitative measures in terms of people – in terms of quality of life and quality of engagement, that we need to look at combining methods.

Certainly doing this kind of an effort is very time and labor and can be financially intensive, but it also can be quite cheap if people are – if part of every evaluation spent a certain amount of time talking to a range of voices. They're going to get – it's another form of triangulation with the other data that they're getting from the reports that are given to them and then the statistics that are gathered. It's one more point of information to really see are we really achieving the impact that we think we're achieving because sometimes these short term gains don't last, and if we had conversations with people, we'd probably would know why.

In terms of the donors still making decisions and models for participated approach is working well. Like I said, I think that we need to break out of that mentality of we are going to make all of the decisions and look at where can we actually allow and encourage and ensure more local decision making with our partners whether that be with the partner governments, with local organizations, with the local business but, largely, with the people, not just the implementers but really with the people who are supposed to be benefitting and how are they a part of that decision making process on even who gets funded to do the assistance.

I mean there's some interesting examples of – in some of the community mobilization programs that – I don't know if we use that word anymore – that the USAID has funded, in the past, of how communities were involved in selecting the contractors who get to do the work, and I think that was a factor of the NSP, the National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan and others.

So there are ways that people can be much more engaged in the decision making, and if they are, they say, “Look, we're going to be far more accountable. We're going to make sure that this is going to make a bigger difference,” if they're involved in making the decisions.

In terms of the short term approach and the political will, I think that, again, you can always find people who are keen and eager to change, and I think that the political will also can be there if the relationship is a little bit different. I think that I remember sitting in Kosovo with – I won't say

who – but a former minister who said she would go to coordination meetings, and basically, she'd sit there, as the only Kosovar or one or two in the room with all the donors, and they already basically decided everything. Like she just felt like she had no voice and no input.

And so it's also a political will on the donor side both to really, truly let local people and local organizations and – drive the process, and I think that, if – it's a challenge across this, but it's actually critical. And I think you can always find some people who are trying to do the right thing and to change.

Audience: Hi, it's Miz Jurani from the ____ Foundation, also a member of the ____, so thank you very much, on behalf of SID, for doing this. What I haven't heard you speak about this morning – and it's not so well highlighted in your report – is a fundamental paradigm shift that comes about if people put their own money on the table or governments put their own money on the table.

I have witnessed this in many different contexts, and I wonder what you have to say about that and the whole role of ownership and how that changes when the financing question becomes much more of a joint question.

Audience: Just a couple of quick – one sort of following up on that but one of the things we found, especially if you get away from thinking about a small scale, whether it's a community or a village, whatever, but start talking about the larger environment, we tend to use the word stakeholder to mean those people who agree with us or who we agree with.

But for instance, if you're doing land tenure, I can tell you there's a whole bunch of people who would like you to fail, so the question is what – how do you deal with this when they – I mean a lot of your discussion I totally agree with. How do you address this when, in fact the society basically has conflicts. There's people who really have different issues and have perfectly forthright reasons why they don't agree with the other person. I think we tend to view this as always a positive, some gain, if we can only find it, and I think there has to be some way of saying development is not always a straight line upwards.

The other issue is, on your number five point, I – which I really, really like, but I thought you were going actually somewhere a little bit different with it which is it isn't just short term but we tend to think of investments as almost a linear thing where it's always the same amount of investment, the same type of thing, every hour, every day, until we get final product.

In our experience, for instance, in Uganda, with some of the facilitation work there, is, actually, the upfront is much longer and different totally in investments, the way it looks, what it does than the final thing, and so it isn't just a question of timeline. It's trying to get people to realize that the final impact is going to require a lot of upfront stuff that just doesn't look the same as what we're used to.

Audience: Hi. A couple of question. Patricia Delvekio, International Purpose. One is what do you see as your next step, Dana? Is there going to be a follow up book called *Implementing the Listening Project*? Because I think there's a real challenge ahead and, as I always see it, the chain starts with us, and what I hear you talking about is really a shifting of a mindset, perception and assumptions that we tend to make. And how do we begin go really challenge ourselves and our own thinking? Thank you and thank you so much for this work. It's really wonderful.

Female: Thanks.

Male: One last question from back here and it was someone was wondering, from the listening project, what came out of the listening project that was surprising or novel that hadn't come out of literature done in the past on aggregated beneficiary responses to development?

Female: Great, thanks. I think that – I think this issue you raise of people having skin in the game is a good one and actually something that came up in several places where people felt like – said, “If we have a greater stake,” and that means not just financially but in the decision making, they then, of course, care about it more and will make sure that it's more successful.

And so I – and we actually heard, in a number of places, this – what often is used is a graduated approach where USAID or the CON Foundation or someone, they initially provide 100 percent of the funding, and over time, the community increases it or the government increases its share of the funding .

And I think that's essential because I think one of the problems is we've often – we've come in with this project based approach, and when the funding ends, governments and local organizations have no other revenue stream. They don't necessarily have the funding set up to support that, and they haven't necessarily built the local support for that. In Bosnia, I actually met – we talked with the foundation. That was one of the things they were trying to do is to work on the laws and to change the culture of philanthropy so that people would understand that civil society needed to be funded and supported by Bosnians themselves.

And one of my favorite quotes, which I didn't include, was from a think tank in Kosovo who said, you know what donors have done too often is created a project society not a civil society that we've gone and we've funded local organizations and created them often, in our own manner, to deliver projects and we haven't built the capacity to advocate, to play a role in policymaking, to work on issues that people care about for the long term.

And so I think that that's – it's actually really critical, and we need to look at the way that we fund and engage with – and sometimes, money is a bigger part of the problem, and that's what they're talking about is having this different kind of relationship and a real partnership.

On – I mean I totally agree with you, Tony, on the – that there's always going to be people that differ, and we have that in our own country. And I think the issue is whether people have forums where they can actually discuss and where – and that's where the skill issue comes in, actually people being able to facilitate very contentious discussions. If you're talking about land conflict, you need to have staff who actually manage those discussions, and I think, too often, we're afraid of that and so we just avoid it altogether.

And so we do need to look at that piece and how do we manage that within the process, and I think a lot of times, that some of the opposition, to the approaches that are being taken, would be reduced if we could actually just explain and have better communication about what it is we're doing and why and why it's important to the people – to other people in their country.

And I think, a lot of times, there's just a lot of assumptions and kind of rumors because we don't bother to have the conversations, and in terms of – I totally agree that final impact does require a lot more upfront. And that's why I'm saying there's actually – in the book, we kind of suggest maybe we need to actually have a lot more funding and time built in upfront to allow for consultation.

And if you look at your processes right now, I'm sorry they don't do that. Even the CDCF, from what I read, I looked at, doesn't really build in enough time and the resources to really engage a broad range of stakeholders, and like you said, not just the people who are going to agree with us but to hear from a broad range of voices.

And in terms of the purpose and kind of what's next, I think that this is an area – we are, obviously, going to be working in and trying to work with people on how do we shift this paradigm because it's great to put it out there and say, "We need to do this." But we need to work with people,

and one of the things we've been looking at is either working through existing communities of practice or creating a community sort of paradigm shifters – I don't know – change agents, whatever we want to call ourselves, the people who are trying to work within a broad range of agencies to regularly communicate, bring them together to learn what's working, as people look at the processes and the procedures that they have when they look at how their agency functions, what – who they hire, how they evaluate them, what have they tried that works in terms of making some of these shifts?

And I think that's something would welcome to talk more with USAID about of how sometimes an external agency. Like I said, we don't increment, and so we're in a – we're actually able to maybe sometimes ask tough questions and be there as a kind of – to help people along the way in learning because a lot of this is about organizational change.

And you're right. A lot of this isn't new, and I think what's disappointed, we all know that a lot of these things are the problems and yet, somehow, we never seem to try to deal with them. And I think there's – we're also at a point where the, I think, public questioning and skepticism and discussion about aid, foreign aid, certainly in Europe and also here, is shining a spotlight more and more, and so it's an opportunity to really have a broader discussion and rethink, frankly, how we deliver aid.

I know there's legislative things that are working in that area, but even within people implementing, I think providing forms for people to share and support each other.

And lastly, what came out that was surprising, I think, for me, what was very surprising was just the powerful common narrative. I mean, as I said, we went to 20 different countries and a lot of different regions that had had different kinds of assistance, very different context and people's sort of description of these processes and their engagement or not and – it was very, very similar.

And we had different people listening in every country. We had guiding questions, but many of the conversations were very similar. And that really kind of struck me, and I know we had – also, that we didn't have as much difference, frankly, between humanitarian and development programming. I – for those of you who think the whole speed issues are all about humanitarian programming, they're not. This is also as much about a lot of development programming and that people feel like a lot of these issues are the same.

When they work with aid agencies, their relationship with them and the kinds of assistance may vary. They have one relationship, and they are getting different kinds of assistance with different approaches. And the

confusion that people over why certain kinds of funding, certain approaches are taken, and with other funding, other approaches are taken and it doesn't match up with the rhetoric. There's a lot of sort of – I think a lot more communication, frankly, that we need to do not just in forming and sharing our assumptions and our theories of change but engaging people in the discussion about whether those are even realistic to begin with.

I mean one of the things I was – we – the other surprise for us was that we kind of assumed, going in, that, by working with international and local NGOs mostly, in a few countries we had some donors or other organizations listening with us, that their field staff would have all of the listening skills that they needed, that they knew how to do this.

And, actually, we quickly found out that wasn't the case. Most of them were like, "Where's the survey? Where are the questions? I'm so sick of – I want to have an open ended conversation about aid. Well, I'm an agricultural officer. I just know about agriculture." And we had to take people out of their comfort zone, and for many of the national staff and even some of the – they didn't – they had – they often didn't even understand fully the programs that they were a part of, that they were trying to implement. Their own agencies hadn't even explained what was the theory of change, what are we trying to do and what your role in this is.

And there were some that were afraid that, by exposing things that weren't working, they were going to lose their jobs, and we had to really have that discussion. And when they realized that other people, in the same – in other organizations were facing some of the same challenges, then it opened up the opportunity to really discuss and learn together.

So I think the skill piece of being active, good listeners, of being able to have this kind of – a bigger conversation that goes beyond our little project and our funding is something that we ended up developing a lot more training and spending more time upfront, as you said, with the listeners on actually how to even have these conversations and certainly, also, just how to try to avoid the jargon which we try to do in the book.

Female:

And I think you do a great job with that. I just wanted to underscore a couple of things. On the first chapter in the book, about the methodology, is fascinating. The methodology that you use to listen and to analyze and – in a way that weeds out potential bias on the part of the listeners and that really comes to grips with what is being expressed even though it is being expressed in ways that are different from what we're often used to hearing, is really fascinating.

So I wanted to draw people's attention to that and also to the last chapter which has a lot about different ways of doing that, in particular, Dana, because you showed that other table. I just wanted to draw people's attention to the alternative four steps for funding on page 142. I think we could have a great conversation just on what's on that page.

I do want to confirm that this is a beginning of a conversation, so in addition to the March event to discuss the book, Erin and Larry asked, before they left, that we schedule something with you to continue this conversation within PPL in the next couple of weeks. So I think that this is definitely the beginning of looking at what the concrete implications can be.

So I hope everybody can join me, please, in thanking Dana.

Female: Thank you.

[End of Audio]