

Aid: a mixed blessing

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Introduction

Over the years of providing humanitarian and development assistance, international aid agencies have become increasingly concerned about avoiding paternalism and working with, rather than for, those in need. The evolving shift in aid providers' awareness and in their programming approaches is captured in the serial re-naming, over the past decade and a half, of the people for whom aid is intended, beginning with 'victims' then 'recipients' then 'beneficiaries' then 'counterparts' and now 'participants' or, sometimes, 'clients'. Increasingly, NGOs 'partner' with local agencies (and donors require it); programmes are designed to 'build' local capacity; and community 'participation' is encouraged (or, at least, talked about) in all phases of aid delivery, from planning through to evaluation.

Nonetheless, in spite of efforts to put those who receive aid at the centre of aid programming, recipients' reactions are mixed.

Mixed messages from aid recipients²

A crisis occurs and the television cameras focus on:

- Smiling children in a refugee camp in Kenya jostling, laughing, and joking as they press for handouts – or a stricken Kosovar mother for whom reaching the international aid agency across the border is a matter of life or death for her injured baby.
- A Turkish earthquake survivor thanking the international rescue team for freeing him from the rubble of his former home – to wailing women in Macedonia demanding more aid, crying *'There is not enough; the food is insufficient; the shelter is overcrowded; we need more or our children will die.'*

- A professor in Bosnia-Herzegovina citing statistics of his country's poverty and need and instructing the international community about its obligation to correct these conditions – to a Sierra Leonean who says, *'You save my life today but for what tomorrow? Isn't a dignified death preferable to continued life dependent on the uncertain generosity of the international community?'*
- The flood survivor in Bangladesh recounting the two crises experienced by his village, *'the first, a flood that washed away our homes; the second, international aid that turned us all into beggars'* – to the village food committee in Southern Sudan telling an international NGO to stop food distributions because *'though we need food, if we receive it, our village will be raided by militias and then we will have even less food and be even more insecure.'*
- The women in a Northeast Thailand village shrugging to express their frustration that *'... the aid agency keeps insisting we plan activities by consensus, but we're too busy for endless meetings that they call "community participation"'* – to the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, demanding establishment of refugee committees to plan all camp activities.

Such 'voices' of aid recipients convey a complicated and mixed message to the international community of aid donors. Some demand 'more' while others say 'no more'. Some want greater involvement in the decisions and planning of assistance; others want only to get the funds or the goods and go on with their lives. Some focus on a history of inequality that obligates the international community to an active role in overcoming poverty; others believe that international assistance is always tainted by less-than-honourable motives for external control. Reactions range from heartfelt appreciation to extreme suspicion; from an attempt to get more of it to contempt for donors' wealth; from disgust at outsider control to adoption of insider control; from acceptance of outsider expertise to rejection of dependence on the delivery of aid.

How does one understand such mixed messages? How can we – the 'outsider' aid community – attend to the concerns and demands of those who receive aid, and respond thoughtfully when they don't agree with each other?

Furthermore, how should we interpret the fact that, in spite of the cacophony of difference, there is a common thread of unease or dissatisfaction among many of the comments, including even some of

those who express appreciation for aid? Why is it that something *feels* wrong to many of the intended beneficiaries of aid? What can we do about this?

The issues underlying this unease do not appear solvable through improved aid techniques, better aid goods, or greater logistical efficiency. That is, they cannot be addressed through the 'stuff' of aid alone. Rather, these issues are essentially relational in nature and, thus, require a revisiting of the difficult inequality that exists, inevitably, between international givers and receivers.

Inevitable inequality

The relationship between international donor communities and the aid-providing NGOs on the one hand, and the people who, because of crises, find themselves unable to sustain or improve their lives without outside help on the other is by its nature unequal in three important dimensions.³ First, there is an essential inequality in power that derives from the ability of one side to give because it enjoys a surplus of goods and abilities, while the other side is in need. Second, there is inequality of optionality, arising from the fact that one side can choose whether or not to give, while the other side has little or no choice about accepting aid if they are to survive. Third, inequality arises from the fact that the giving side of the relationship is primarily accountable to communities and powers outside the crisis and only secondarily, if at all, to insiders, the people who receive aid.

There is no way within the systems and structures of international aid that these three inequalities can be overcome. They are inevitable so long as some peoples are able to give while others must receive. However, the tensions inherent in the giving and receiving of aid do not have to be antagonistic and destructive. Recognising their inevitability, we may perhaps develop a process by which these tensions become dynamic and creative.

Creative tensions

What might such a process entail? Though they do not represent a full solution, I suggest here four areas for consideration and action that acknowledge tensions between giver and receiver as inevitable and accept and incorporate them to achieve healthier, more productive outcomes from aid.

Identification of areas of innate equality and inequality

A first step for addressing the giver/receiver tension is for aid donors and recipients both to reaffirm their essential human equality on the one hand, and to acknowledge openly the innate inequality in their circumstances on the other. Fundamental humanitarianism is based, in large part, on the belief that all humans, as humans, have a right to and deserve help when they face difficult circumstances. Underlying this belief is the basic tenet that, as human beings, we are bound to each other in reciprocal valuation of individual dignity and worthiness. That is, we humans are fundamentally equal to each other, at least in principle.

In fact, however, we are deeply unequal by circumstance. To pretend otherwise, or even to try to create protocols and aid structures that attempt to approximate circumstantial equality, may actually undermine the dignity, worthiness, and humanness of both giver and receiver.

When funds and goods flow in one direction and decisions about how much, when, and where such flows occur are lodged outside the community of recipients, no number of ‘consultations’, participatory meetings, or partnership arrangements can change these facts. Perhaps a more honest and, strange as it may sound, humble acknowledgement on the part of the donor side of the relationship of their good luck⁴ in being well-off could provide a better basis for interaction with recipients (who certainly know this anyway). If we manufacture aid structures to obscure this reality or to establish a pretence of equality, a degree of honesty is lost, undermining mutual respect, genuine sympathy, the dignity of life whether poor or rich – all values which might form a healthier basis for the enterprises of aid giving and receiving.

Acceptance of and clarity about the division of labour

Second, givers and receivers of aid should accept the importance of (and define) an appropriate division of labour in their functions. Who knows most about what? Who is better prepared to take which actions? Who is capable of, or responsible for, which decisions?

This step must be based on local realities rather than idealised preconceptions or hopes. It is, of course, always true that people within a society in crisis know their society better than any outsider. However, this does not mean that insiders should assume any or all of the responsibilities for aid delivery in all situations. A valid division of

labour incorporates an assessment of who has what to offer as inputs (who has what knowledge or other competence) and an assessment of likely outcomes from the interactive process (what combination will achieve the goals most effectively?).

Sometimes local knowledge (a superior input) can involve also local prejudice (distorting outcomes). For example, experience in conflict settings shows that, very often, local individuals and institutions are embroiled in the inter-group divisions that define the conflict and, thus, not likely to apportion aid impartially or fairly. Sometimes this is a result of their preferred alliances; sometimes the conscientious commitment of local people to serve all sides is subverted by the pressures applied on them by colleagues, family members, militias. In either case, it may be preferable for outsiders to assume responsibility for allocating aid.

Alternatively, in other aid settings, local structures may exist for wise and sensitive decisions about how to allocate limited aid. There may be existing systems for physically distributing aid goods or for identifying when aid is no longer needed. Where this is the case, the assumption of these responsibilities by outside aid givers only undermines existing local capacity (possibly weakening it) and wastes aid resources on the creation of unnecessary parallel systems.

A well-thought-through division of labour would, similarly, acknowledge that in virtually all international aid situations, external donors know better than local recipients the dangers of too much aid, too long. Broad experience of providing aid has educated donors and international NGOs about the dangers and downsides of aid. First-time aid recipients do not know these potential costs. A healthy division of labour between giver and receiver should acknowledge these differences in 'aid expertise'. Clarity about roles can be a vehicle for acknowledging capacities that exist within recipient communities and, thus, affirming the dignity and worthiness of recipients' humanness. It also can provide the mechanism for clarifying the genuine differences in circumstances that, unacknowledged, can lead to distrust and resentment between givers and receivers.

Defining the goal of aid as 'none needed'

Third, a re-shaping of the relationship between givers and receivers could be furthered by agreement that the sole purpose of aid is to enable people not to need it. This should be the goal of both humanitarian and development assistance, even though in both

dimensions need is shaped to a greater or lesser extent by events outside the control of aid.

A corollary to this is the further acknowledgement that long-term aid relationships are often unnecessary and damaging. Short-term aid can, under many circumstances, both be effective in tiding people over a crisis and have a positive developmental impact in that it does not impede recipients' resumption of full responsibility for their own survival and welfare.

It is important, here, to distinguish between a long-term commitment of aid providers to aid recipients (entailing a full sense of continued caring for people's welfare) and long-term aid programmes. A firm commitment to long-term caring may best be realised through short-term inputs of external material assistance coupled with sustained engagement in promoting the changes in the world order that allow extreme poverty and wealth to co-exist. Not all (or even most) 'root causes' of poverty and suffering are located in the place where poverty and suffering occur.

Managing anguish and joy simultaneously

Finally, our handling of the tensions inherent in the donor–recipient relationship might be improved through more skilful and thoughtful management of the contradictions encountered daily in aid work – namely, the contradictions between the horror and anguish of suffering which prompts aid, and the importance of affirming the joy and pleasures of life if aid is to be worthwhile. In the process of helping and being helped, it is easy to focus on pain and loss. However, if life is to be preferred over death (that is, if saving lives through humanitarian assistance or helping improve the chances of sustained lives through development aid is worthwhile), then life should be, daily, enjoyed.

Philosophers and theologians have told us that suffering is not, in itself, demeaning and demoralising. However, responses to suffering can make it so. Somehow, among aid workers, there is a widely accepted sense that a frenetic pace of exhausted response is the right way to do emergency aid or, equally, that long-term, slow-and-tedious plodding is required in development aid. But suffering can be demeaned by harried efficiency or working tedium just as much as by pity or denial.

In all societies and across all societal differences, genuine friendships are possible. Everywhere there are people who are

fascinating, engaging, loving, and fun. There must be some other step we can take as aid providers and aid recipients to maintain inward composure in the face of grim realities so that we allow time for talk, exchange of family lore, sitting together to rest and reflect, and doing 'recreational' things together. Mutual enjoyment should not be confined to enclaves of aid givers but must also be sought among recipients. Aid providers may be able to redress some of the innate imbalance in their relationships with recipients if they find ways to be empathetic with the latter's sad experiences and, simultaneously, affirm that life is to be enjoyed.

Our Sierra Leonean friend reminds us of this when he asks his difficult question: '*You save my life today, but for what tomorrow?*' To his query I would only add: if life is worth saving today, then it should also be liveable, worth living, today (as well as tomorrow). The processes of providing and receiving international assistance need to be re-humanised by enjoyment.

The mixed messages so honestly conveyed by the multiple and varied recipients of aid carry one clear and common text. Another great challenge – perhaps the most important of all for aid providers and recipients – is to accept both our innate human equality and our circumstantial inequality and, in the face of both, to establish relationships of mutual respect and contemporaneous enjoyment of each other. The mixed messages remind us that humanitarian and development assistance are not only about timely deliveries of needed goods (critical as these are). International aid is, fundamentally, about relationships.

Notes

- 1 Personally, I avoid the phrase 'capacity building' because it risks the same dangers found in earlier 'needs assessments'. That is, too often outsiders define which capacities are missing in a society and, hence, which ones they are going to 'build'. Far preferable, and emphasised years ago by my colleague, Peter Woodrow, and me is the idea of recognising the capacities that *exist* in societies and, as outsiders, supporting and building *on* these rather than assuming a capacity deficit that we, as aid providers, need to fill (Anderson and Woodrow 1989). Of course, there are other writers and thinkers (for instance, Eade 1997) who also use the idea of building capacities to refer to efforts to be responsive to local people who, specifically, request technical or other outsider help.
- 2 Each quotation here is based on comments made to me directly or to colleagues who have reported them to me. Before I wrote this paper, I

reviewed with several other aid workers their impressions about how recipients feel about aid. Interestingly, among us, we could think of few instances in which we had heard unambiguous praise of aid from any recipient. This is not, of course, a scientific sampling of opinions, but it seems to support my sense that messages from recipients are, at best, mixed.

- 3 I thank my colleague Hizkias Assefa for helping me to think through these ideas of inequality between outsiders and insiders, in a series of personal conversations.
- 4 The word I really want to use here is 'grace' which, I learned long ago in my Presbyterian upbringing, means 'unmerited favour'!

References

- Anderson, M.B. and P.J. Woodrow (1989, new edn. 1998) *Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Eade, D. (1997) *Capacity Building: An Approach to People-centred Development*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.