

Listening to the displaced: analysis, accountability and advocacy in action

by Simon Harris

This article summarizes the objectives, methodology and outcomes of Oxfam GB and SCF UK's 'Listening to the Displaced' research series undertaken in the conflict-affected areas of northern Sri Lanka. It also highlights the lessons learned, probable future directions and wider application of the Listening concept.

People living through the cyclical deprivations of displacement in an environment of complex and protracted violent conflict seldom have the opportunity of a meaningful say in shaping the decisions and factors affecting their lives. Furthermore, local and international providers of humanitarian and development assistance frequently fail to take adequate account of the context in which their constituents live.

Although "most emergency situations are characterized by top-down solutions that do not always take the opinion of the displaced/refugees into account",¹ action research initiatives offer an opportunity to help address this problem through establishing a consultative dialogue between the humanitarian agency and those people it seeks to



Focus group discussion in the Wannai region of northern Sri Lanka

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assist. By drawing together issues of analysis, accountability and advocacy, community research in areas affected by war can have a significant impact on improving the effectiveness of humanitarian programmes as well as developing local capacities for conflict transformation.

Objectives

Three Listening surveys were conducted between 1996 and 1998. Although this has been an evolving process in terms of scope, methodology and specific areas of inquiry, the basic objectives of Listening have remained essentially four-fold, focusing on the opinions and perspectives of those people directly affected by the conflict:

- To assess changes in the concerns, needs and capacities of people affected by conflict.
- To evaluate humanitarian and development inputs from a constituency perspective.
- To identify issues on which international NGOs could provide improved support to their constituents.

- To enable the voices of conflict-affected people to be heard by humanitarian agencies and key parties to the conflict.

Methodology

A wide range of increasingly participatory methodologies has been employed by the Sri Lankan Listening exercises. The initial survey relied primarily on data collection through semi-structured group, family and individual interviews guided by a checklist of themes such as the provision of non-food relief items (NFRIs) and the relationship between the resident population and displaced communities.

The second round looked towards strengthening the longitudinal potential of the exercise. Although it had not been possible to track exactly the same group of respondents over time due to further displacement and migration, by revisiting some of the same locations and communities it was possible to broadly assess any general changes in conditions. This Listening survey also recognised the

need to overcome the power differentials informing community and family group responses. Previous community discussions had revealed that it was frequently those with higher educational, class or caste standing who were the main respondents in a group. A more representational response was elicited by applying a greater range of PRA activities and introducing a focus group methodology that cross-checked the responses of the general community to specific questions with those of groups comprising exclusively of women or children.

The most recent Listening exercise took a significantly more empowering and enabling approach by employing “a methodology that let the participants set the discussion agenda and let them prioritise the issues around which they would like to speak”.² In 1998, 2,464 people from 25 displaced communities in the Wannu and 805 returnees to Jaffna participated in the Listening programme.

Outcomes

Listening exercises have resulted in a greater understanding by humanitarian and development agencies of the problems, needs, aspirations and capacities of people affected by conflict. This improved understanding has resulted in a number of tangible policy and practice changes ranging from, a gender sensitive revision of NFRI family pack contents (such as the inclusion of menstrual towels) to Oxfam’s strategic shift away from short-term humanitarian relief towards longer-term investment in emergency preparedness, community strengthening, sustainable livelihoods and conflict transformation. By establishing a tool for eliciting the community’s evaluation of programme impact, Listening has paved the way for agencies to become more accountable to their constituents.

The process has also, somewhat surprisingly, enabled those normally muted by fear in an environment of authoritarian control and violence, to express their desire for peace. Listening exercises have consistently “demonstrated the importance of peace for communities living through conflict, and the fact that they thought NGOs had a role to play in this process”.³ In an environment where the freedom of individual or collective expression may be suppressed, or where the dislocating experience of displacement has fragmented and destroyed

traditional social community structures, the process of Listening may provide a starting point for community strengthening, peace building and self-advocacy.

Lessons learned

Although the Listening process has, for the first time in Sri Lanka, provided people in areas affected by conflict with a platform through which their voices can be heard, the process remains primarily a humanitarian agency’s product. Voices of the displaced that are unable to strike a chord with the strategic objectives of these agencies run the risk of falling on deaf ears.

- Listening is still a largely extractive exercise that needs to develop strategies for feeding back its results to the participants.
- There has been a failure to capitalize on some important advocacy opportunities arising from Listening. While the dissemination of findings and recommendations from the most recent survey highlighted the concerns of displaced people over issues of peace, employment, health and education, these concerns were not translated into an orchestrated and sustained advocacy strategy aimed at affecting policy and practice change by international NGOs, government and the LTTE.
- Some significant areas of need expressed through Listening have received a slow response and low priority from humanitarian assistance and development agencies. For example, although the communities called for greater NGO involvement in bringing about peace, programme implications, potential physical dangers and political sensitivities have largely prevented humanitarian agencies not only from taking an active role in this field but also from helping to enable constituencies to further articulate their frustrations over the continuation of the conflict.

The critical lessons of this process warn that greater attention must be given to the issue of accountability. Enabling constituents to set the agenda for such an exercise is inadequate if mechanisms do not also exist for them to demand and receive an account of how their needs and opinions were processed and acted upon.

Future directions

Listening is about respect: respect for the right of those we seek to help to have the major say in how we try to help them. As an evolving process, Listening needs to become more responsive and accountable to those voices it seeks to hear. Good communication is not just about speaking and listening. It is also about checking that what **you** think you have heard is actually what **they** think they said. The next stage of Listening in Sri Lanka needs to be more aware of this. In particular there is a need to:

- Strengthen the capacity of Listening’s advocacy potential by ensuring that an advocacy strategy with clear, measurable objectives agreed by the constituents is fully integrated into the research process from its inception.
- Ensure that the conclusions and recommendations based on the collected information are channelled back through the constituents for their validation and revision.
- Avoid unrealistic expectations by ensuring that the constituents are clear about the mandate and resource limitations of humanitarian and development agencies to act upon their needs.

During the course of 2000, Oxfam GB and SCF UK aim to establish a community team to facilitate an ongoing and mutually beneficial Listening dialogue between humanitarian agencies and those people affected by conflict. Although the depth of analysis generated from this exchange will be invaluable for implementing appropriate and effective programmes, the long-term sustainability of those programmes will be largely dependent on the measure of accountability that they bring to the relationship.

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1 Demusz K *Listening to the Displaced: Action Research in the Conflict Zones of Sri Lanka*, Oxfam Working Paper, March 2000. See Publications section on p46.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Goodhand J and Lewer N ‘Oxfam - Sri Lanka: Complex Political Emergency Research Programme - Agency Report’, July 1999.