LISTENING PROJECT

Field Visit Report

Thailand

March 2007
This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

**These documents do not represent a final product of the project.** While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project’s findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.
Background on the Listening Project

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international NGOs, donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has started the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance. The Listening Project seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by international actors. Those of us who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, environmental conservation, human rights and/or peace-building efforts can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and judgments of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such international efforts.

The Listening Teams did not work from pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, we told people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, we were interested to hear from them how they perceived these efforts. We asked if they would be willing to spend some time with us, telling us their opinions and ideas. In this way, we conversed about their issues of concern, without pre-determining specific topics.

Many conversations were held with one or two individuals, but in other cases, larger groups formed and what began as small-group dialogues became, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. In many cases, conversations were not pre-arranged, and a Listening Team would travel to a community and strike up a conversation with whomever was available and willing to talk, including those who had and had not received international assistance. Appointments were also made with government officials and other local leaders.

Over a period of two years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty countries, with Thailand being the seventh. The project will gather what we hear from people in all of these locations in order to integrate these insights into future aid work and, thereby, to improve its effectiveness.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those who were involved in Thailand deserve great appreciation for their generous logistical support and the insights and dedication of all the staff that participated in and supported the effort.

The Listening Project in Thailand

The Listening Project organized a listening exercise in Thailand in March 2007 with the help of the American Red Cross, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Thai Red Cross, Disaster Tracking and Recovery Center (D-TRAC), Plan International Thailand, World Concern, Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperative (BAAC) and RaksThai (a member of CARE International). These organizations provided funds, staff, and other in-kind support (hospitality, transportation, etc.) to the effort, and CDA sent one staff and two outside consultants to facilitate this listening exercise. A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the involvement and significant contributions of
participating agencies, and those involved in the Thailand listening exercise deserve great appreciation for their generous logistical support and the dedication of the staff that participated in and supported the effort.

Three regions of Thailand were visited during the listening exercise: 1) the tsunami-affected areas in Phang Nga Province; 2) districts around Khon Kaen in the northeast; and 3) the southeast province of Si Sa Ket. The regions were selected by the participating agencies in consultation with CDA, with the intention of visiting communities that have experienced different kinds of international assistance over a range of time. Due to the differences in both socio-economic conditions and the levels and types of assistance between these three regions, this report presents the regional findings in separate sections. A brief overview section outlines the common findings from all three regions.

30 staff of the participating agencies were involved as “listeners” in the three regions, holding approximately 160 conversations with about 390 people. The Listening Teams did not work from pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, we told people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance, we were interested to hear from them how they perceived these efforts. We asked if they would be willing to spend some time with us, telling us their opinions and ideas. In this way, we conversed about their issues of concern without pre-determining specific topics.

In several places, the Listening Teams began with a visit to a local district office and/or the village headman both to hear about their involvement in and opinions on the impact of international assistance, and to seek permission to talk with other people in their areas. Many conversations were held with one or two individuals, but in some cases, larger groups formed and what began as small-group dialogues became, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. In most cases, conversations were not pre-arranged and many people were randomly selected.

The conversations included people from various ethnic and religious groups; adult men and women; the elderly and youth; a great number of farmers and fishermen; district and village officials and community leaders; people in urban and rural areas; and people who held leadership positions and those who felt marginalized. Listening Teams also spoke to medical personnel in hospitals and clinics, Buddhist monks, staff of local NGOs, small business owners, savings group committees, micro-credit groups, school teachers and principals and migrant workers. In addition, several conversations were held in Bangkok with staff at the UN, a national NGO and with a physician.

In each location, teams talked to a range of people, some of whom had been direct recipients of international assistance and some of whom had not. The teams found people willing to talk with us and open in reflecting on their experiences and observations. We felt fortunate to have the opportunity to listen to so many people with a range of perspectives. Nonetheless, we are aware that these conversations represent only a small fraction of the opinions and ideas of the people of Thailand. We therefore do not draw broad conclusions from this visit. Instead, we have captured a valuable snapshot of some perspectives and opinions on the cumulative effects of international assistance. Over the coming months, as we listen in other locations around the world, we will continue to look for common themes, attitudes, conclusions and suggestions.
The findings are organized into key thematic sections in order to organize and make sense of the large amounts of information we gathered. We have attempted to record as many direct quotes and specific examples as we could in order to honor and correctly represent the opinions of people with whom we spoke. The selected quotes and examples capture and illustrate the insights, perspectives and experiences that are representative of what we heard in many conversations. We indicate the frequency of comments by using markers such as “some,” “a few,” “many,” or “the majority.” We do not present a comment of a single person as a general opinion. However, in some cases, the voices of individuals are presented in quotes without our qualifiers. We also provide a brief summary (where available) of the Thailand Listening Team’s reflections on some of the questions raised by what we heard which seem to deserve more listening and analysis.

**A Brief Note on the History of International Assistance to Thailand**

The history of external assistance to Thailand encompasses over 50 years of foreign aid and includes: bilateral aid in the form of monetary grants and loans; democracy building and development assistance; military assistance; large-scale infrastructure development projects; and structural adjustment programs funded by multilateral institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, the United Nations and the Asian Development Bank.

When Thailand was ranked as one of the least developed countries, a number of international development agencies implemented programs aimed at supporting vulnerable and marginalized communities and building capacity for community-driven development. In addition to this long-term development work, a number of foreign relief agencies provided humanitarian assistance on the Thailand-Cambodia border during the height of the Cambodian refugee crisis in the 1980s, and international aid agencies are still present in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Over the course of the last decade, there has been a decrease in international development assistance to Thailand. The post-tsunami relief effort, however, brought back a number of humanitarian and development agencies to southern Thailand.

**Thai Government Development Assistance**

Thailand’s national economy was hard hit by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, but the country has since repaid the loans provided for its recovery by the IMF. Since 2002, Thailand has not received economic aid from foreign donors and has in fact become a donor itself – contributing $60 million in economic aid to neighboring countries in the last few years. Thailand’s Government has been making steady and significant progress in poverty reduction since the 1980s. The country is referred to as “middle income” in contemporary development literature and, according to the United Nations Development Program, has achieved many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the national level well in advance of the 2015 target date. There are, however, several regions in the country where human development indicators are lower than average and where extreme poverty persists.

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¹ The Listening Project plans to engage in a listening exercise in and around the refugee camps in the upcoming months.
Thailand’s “sufficiency economy,” articulated and promoted by the King of Thailand, is founded on the principles of moderation, wisdom and insight, and the need for built-in resilience against the risks which arise from internal or external change. It emphasizes self-reliance, both at the individual and the national level. Reflecting this, several development programs were initiated by the Thai Government, some with support from donor agencies. The programs aim to reduce economic vulnerability by enabling poor communities to plan and manage their own development activities. The majority of these programs use microfinance schemes to address poverty, health, environmental and educational needs in rural areas. These include:

1. The One Million Baht Village Revolving Fund which was launched in 2001 by the Thai Government and provides a 1 million Baht (approximately $32,000) revolving fund for each of the nation’s 70,000 villages to support new and existing community-based projects;
2. The People’s Bank (or the Bank of the Poor) which was launched by the Government to provide small loans from the Government Savings Bank for non-farming income-generation activities;
3. and the Community Enterprise Act, which was introduced by policymakers in 2004 based on the success of communities in creating and managing their own enterprises. This act encourages communal enterprises to invest and manage community-owned raw materials, natural resources or farm products for the communities’ own consumption and for income-generation.

Additional contextual information is provided briefly at the start of the regional sections.

| Overview of Key Findings from Phang-Nga, Phuwieng, Si Sa Ket and Bangkok |

A number of common themes emerged in conversations held across the regions visited during this listening exercise. However, the Thailand Listening Team was also interested in the differences of opinion between people and communities who experienced disaster relief and recovery assistance and those who received of long-term development assistance. Therefore, the bulk of the findings with relevant examples and quotes, are presented in regional sections.

Below, we offer a preliminary analysis of the common themes.

In all regions, people spoke about the importance of communication and collaboration between all stakeholders involved in relief and development activities. Regular and open communication between the national and local governments, international and local agencies, and community members is seen as critical for ensuring transparency and building trust, decreasing the sense of uncertainty and suspicion, and serving as a vehicle for community participation in planning, design and implementation. Aid recipients want to have options, to understand these options, and to make informed decisions. As one development practitioner acknowledged:

“When communities are not well-informed about development programs, this negatively impacts the level of participation and consequently, long-term sustainability. We know that it is important for all development practitioners to be explicit in acknowledging that communities have a lot to offer in the way of analysis and guidance, and we ask why so
often we underestimate their contributions and guidance in our planning and decision-making processes.”

Many people shared their views on the sense of ownership that they do or would like to feel as a result of participating in activities and projects that are introduced in their communities. The general consensus was that when community members are engaged in decision-making processes in all steps along the way, this leads to greater ownership and long-term positive impacts of these development efforts. Conversely, participating in select activities provides people with very little knowledge of the consequences and effects of their actions and gives them little exposure to decision-making and participatory community development processes. People spoke about the “need to plan together” and that communities require a certain amount of preparation to engage in these planning steps effectively.

As in many previous listening exercises, recipients discussed the targeting of assistance, with questions about who defines vulnerability and how the beneficiaries are chosen. Communities make clear distinctions between chronically vulnerable and poverty-affected people and those who suffered from crisis brought on by a natural disaster. The outside development efforts, as observed and analyzed by recipients and non-recipients, often overlook the plethora of socio-economic factors that affect people’s livelihoods and economic stability. People noted that their access to resources and their capacity to improve their own economic life was not fully understood by development workers who often relied on “one-size fits all” needs assessments and planning processes. Agencies often have to contend with donor interests and agendas and are driven by the urgency to implement. Communities, on the other hand, are asking for a more careful, thoughtful and informed engagement which utilizes their local knowledge and resources. We heard several positive examples where the involvement of local NGOs was a critical factor in determining culturally appropriate and sustainable responses to specific humanitarian and development challenges.

Questions about cumulative impacts often prompted commentary from the people on measurements of success for development interventions. As recipients of and participants in development activities, many people expressed concerns about inconsistent follow-up and the lack of continuity and mutual learning in the final or post-implementation stages of interventions. We heard multiple requests for regular follow-up and monitoring (“Come check on your projects!”), but also for guidance, opportunities to give feedback mid-course, and technical assistance and support for specific sectors like micro-finance and other income-generating activities. For many Listening Team members, learning about impact meant going beyond accounting for past projects and physical infrastructure, to looking at how strong/resilient the communities are after the assistance efforts, and asking about effects on the quality of life. Community-based organizations called for “NGOs to transfer their knowledge to local groups and hold public forums to discuss impacts and how to move forward.”

In two regions, Phuwieng and the Andaman coast, we heard about unintended negative impacts of international assistance, namely increasing the tensions and divisions in the community. People spoke about how interpersonal and inter-communal tensions arose due to the way assistance was allocated, the variable quality of assistance, and the loss of trust between community members and their local leadership. Several prominent community leaders in
southern Thailand saw communal disunity and resentments fostered by the way relief agencies distributed their assistance to select segments of the population. In addition, the tsunami and the subsequent housing construction has brought the notion of community under question as some people were resettled and bunched together in newly created villages and housing projects. The project-level impact assessments very often miss out on these intangible but important impacts.

In conversations about cumulative impacts, we asked people to step back and reflect on their experiences with past international assistance efforts. These conversations often transitioned into conversations about lasting change and forward-looking visions of development. Communities in all regions seemed to be in agreement that livelihoods/job creation was by far the most critical area of support in need of attention by development actors wishing to leave a lasting, positive footprint. In the southeast and northeast, people discussed job creation and livelihoods as critical to reduce seasonal migration. In the southern part of Thailand, livelihoods projects were expected to alleviate the effects of post-tsunami relocation for many coastal families and the seasonal shifts in employment due to weather patterns.

Below we present more findings and reflections by the Listening Team members by region.

### Regional Report from the Listening Exercise in Tsunami-Affected Areas of Phang-Nga

The Listening Teams visited approximately 20 villages in the tsunami-affected areas around Thai Muang, Takuapa and Khuraburi districts. Listening Team members included 3 expatriates and 13 national staff representing four organizations: American Red Cross/IFRC, Disaster Recovery and Tracking Center (D-TRAC), Plan International Thailand and World Concern. The teams held 72 conversations with about 180 people over the course of four and a half days.

**A Note on Context in the Tsunami-Affected Areas**

The December 2004 tsunami severely impacted six provinces along the Andaman coast of Thailand, killing close to 8,200 people and displacing more than 6,000. UNDP has estimated that 120,000 individuals working in the tourism sector lost their jobs, and an additional 30,000 individuals employed in the fisheries sector lost their sources of livelihood. An estimated 50,000 children were affected by the tsunami, and, according to the Ministry of Education, an estimated 1,480 children lost one or both parents.

Soon after the disaster, assistance poured in from the Thai Government and Royal foundations, local and foreign NGOs, corporations and private individuals. Humanitarian relief agencies, along with the Government, set up temporary camps and distributed clothing, cash and food. Over 150 international agencies, ranging from large humanitarian NGOs to faith-based charities and private foundations, funded and provided assistance that included housing construction, boat construction/distribution, monetary grants/loans and training for income generation activities, as well as scholarships and support to orphans. In the recovery and rebuilding phase, complicated questions over land titles and property rights for squatters, the vested interests of the tourism

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2 Phang-Nga was the hardest hit province among the tsunami-affected areas.

3 [http://www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org/country/humantoll.asp](http://www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org/country/humantoll.asp)

4 UN Resident Coordinator, Thailand, Situation Report No. 11, April 1, 2005
industry, and environmental concerns emerged as some of the obstacles to well-intentioned reconstruction efforts.

WHAT WE HEARD

Many people described in detail the different types of tangible assistance (food, medicine, clothing, housing, boats, and cash assistance) that they had received or knew about. A number of international agencies working in the tsunami-affected areas are currently implementing development projects aimed at strengthening local communities. Consequently, we also heard opinions and perspectives on the value of training and other “soft” goods that aimed to boost people’s existing livelihoods or teach them a new trade.

1. “Good Impacts” and Contributions of International Assistance

Virtually everyone we listened to in the tsunami-affected areas expressed a profound sense of gratitude for the tremendous outpouring of international support in the aftermath of the disaster, and for the assistance that they received as individuals and as communities.

“I am an elderly woman living alone so it was a blessing to have help come – we got bigger houses, more help and recovered faster this way. My house is so much better from what it used to be.”

An elderly Muslim woman in a fishing village of Ban Nai Rai

“If they didn’t come, I probably still wouldn’t have a house, would be homeless and maybe working three times as hard to rebuild some type of dwelling.”

Woman in a coastal village of Laem Pom destroyed by the tsunami

“There has been a lot of positive impact from international assistance in this area. The immediate help was crucial. Foreign medical staff helped with recovering and identifying bodies. They used special forensic techniques that local authorities did not have. If it wasn’t for them, we would still be identifying the deceased.”

A female school teacher who temporarily lived in a temple where recovered bodies were brought for storage, identification and cremation

“This help leaves a lot of change behind for many more people, even those who were unaffected, or those who were born after the tsunami. It will last for a long time.”

Woman commenting on a school and a library rebuilt after the tsunami

A headman in a village where an international agency involved the community in rebuilding was convinced the assistance had made a significant difference in people’s lives. He said it strengthened their economic security by helping them rebuild their own houses and livelihoods. He had seen people in other communities quit working to receive free assistance, and proudly announced that no one in his village had chosen to put aside their work.

Many people drew comparisons between external assistance and the local government efforts.
Sentiments such as “The best thing is that NGOs work fast” were heard multiple times in many conversations.

A medical officer in a coastal clinic considered the expansion of patient receiving rooms, paid for by a foreign agency, as the assistance with the most long-term benefit. Some people also spoke about the positive impact that the return of foreign visitors was having on the revival of the tourism industry and in its turn, on the local fisheries and agriculture.

In several locations, people told us that before the tsunami they had no communal meetings. During the last two and half years, however, they found themselves collectively engaged in determining communal and individual needs. In many cases, these communal decision-making mechanisms were created in response to the presence and the work of international and local NGOs in their communities. Some of these local committees continue to meet regularly to discuss disputes and issues relating to the environment or land tenure. School teachers in one village noted that there are now more volunteers, due to their participation in the relief efforts led by the local government in collaboration with international agencies.

2. “Unfair Process” and Increased Tensions in Communities

Many people talked about an “unfair process” of aid distribution that contributed negatively to communal solidarity and interpersonal relations. There were several distinct issues that people discussed in great detail, including:

1) Inequalities in the Quality and Amounts of Assistance

A number of people described how some individuals and communities received better quality or “extra” assistance from certain international agencies compared to the assistance provided by other agencies or the national Government. Making a humorous reference to a once widespread local practice of taking multiple wives, in which the first wife was always privileged, some people described the houses built with better quality materials and larger in size as “first wife houses.” They wondered why some NGOs built “second-wife houses” and referred to the Government-built houses as “third-wife houses.” In several cases, we saw all three “styles” present in the same village.

Many people compared the amounts of assistance given to nearby villages and how it had affected their relationships.

“We also saw the Moken village next door get lots and lots of assistance – what about us? There are lots of tensions between our communities because of this.”

Head of a nearby Thai fishing village

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5 Minority and indigenous groups, such as the Moken people whose livelihoods are almost entirely dependent on fishing, and the Burmese migrants living in the area, were among those who were severely affected by the disaster.
“It’s true that we were not affected and we could have recovered on our own, which we did. We are not asking for more. But we just think it is very unfair that people who lived farther away from the coast got so much. If they didn’t and we didn’t, that would be fairer. We can’t be mad at them, but deep down we feel it is not right.”

Family members in one non-recipient community

2) Who Received Assistance

Many comments were made in regards to certain people and communities receiving “extra” assistance or “undeserved” assistance because of dishonesty or their connections to the local leadership or district authorities.

“There are people who got affected and didn’t receive anything and there are those who benefited unlawfully. There have been tensions and conflict. Our community is not the same.”

A fisherman’s wife in a village in Khuraburi district

People expressed profound disappointment with the way these cases of dishonesty and subsequent jealousies affected the sense of solidarity in their communities.

“It is sad that generosity and all this help from outside also has a negative effect on our people. There are many tensions and conflicts that emerged between individuals who were affected by the tsunami and those individuals who were trying to benefit from assistance unfairly. Even people in the same village, former neighbors, have conflict because they think the other benefited unfairly or too much.”

A school teacher in a school housing orphans and vulnerable children

A headman in one village said that he was contacted by many NGOs but often refused aid because he did not want to deal with conflicts that he was sure would arise. One resettled woman said that she thinks international NGOs are fairer than the local government. She trusts them because they don’t ask for anything back, whereas she had to pay bribes to receive help from local authorities. However, many people were concerned that international agencies are not doing enough to avoid corruption in local decision-making structures.

“We don’t like the fact that NGOs got lists from the headman who often directed them which house to rebuild first. We saw some houses were rebuilt early but they were not even fully damaged. You should think about timing more when you bring assistance, what is needed first, then later and what can come last. Some people had nowhere to live but had to wait to be helped last. It should be better planned.”

Husband and wife who rebuilt their own house

“You need to find the facts before handing out the assistance and decide who you should work with. If you deliver your assistance through a head of village and he happens to be an honest person, then your assistance will be most useful and will reach its intended beneficiaries. But if he happens to be a self-serving person, then it will be wrong to provide assistance because it can do more harm than good.”

Husband and wife who rebuilt their own house
Monk in a local Buddhist temple, Khuraburi district

“You should really consider how you distribute your assistance and to whom. We know fishermen who lost their boats in the tsunami but didn’t get these small boats replaced. But there are people who live up the hill and never fished in their lives and they received big boats from NGOs or the Government. They use these for recreation now.”

Two fisherwomen selling fish in Takua Pa market

“You should be respectful of course and recognize the proper channels and get information from the district, but don’t give them things or money. If you really want to distribute through the Government, then give them only food and medicine. These things expire fast and so they can’t keep these for themselves. But don’t give them cash - I think this only makes corruption worse.”

A shopkeeper in Bang Nian Market

Some people talked about being “invisible” to the international assistance efforts due to the “unfair” selection criteria set by agencies and/or the Government. These people included:

- squatters and people who did not own property or land;
- Burmese migrant workers who did not posses legal paperwork or Government-issued identification;
- renters or extended family members who shared housing with relatives prior to the tsunami;
- some fishermen who did not have papers proving they owned a boat;
- 3) small business owners, especially those whose businesses are located in rented properties.

In one example, an owner of a dive shop in a rented building told us that the building’s owner presented paperwork and received assistance for structural repairs but never actually did them. The dive shop owner had to pay back the rent for the months that the shop was not operational and make repairs on her own by borrowing large sums of money from banks and friends. She was told that as a renter she was not eligible for local government no-interest loans or international assistance allotted for business owners.

Many aid efforts bypassed Burmese migrant workers and their families due to their tenuous legal status in Thailand and restrictions placed by the Government. Several Burmese migrants we spoke to recalled a few initial visits by international aid workers who were assessing their situation, but said few ever returned. Migrants concluded that the reason was “because we don’t have ID cards and the Government does not want anyone to help us.” We also heard reports of entire families hiding in the hills for weeks after the tsunami fearing that they would be arrested and/or deported if they approached the sites of temporary shelters to ask for relief supplies. In those instances where assistance was provided to this community, Burmese migrants described the vast differences in the quality and quantity of assistance, having observed that neighboring Thai communities always received more attention and more assistance.

3) The process of selection
The beneficiary selection process used by some international agencies and government offices was seen as unfair by some in the recipient communities. In one Moken (minority indigenous group) village, people appreciated the assistance they received but also described the problems that the selection process had caused in their community. They wanted to use their own “fair process” of drawing people’s names out of a hat to determine beneficiaries for limited housing assistance. Instead, the NGO staff sat them down and picked who would get the houses. The Moken community did not like this process and, according to their local leader, there have been several conflicts between community members ever since. He noted the decreased sense of solidarity evidenced, in his view, by the fact that there are no more communal meals. He added that the “unfair selection process” and the smaller size of the new houses caused extended families to split and separate, causing further communal and familial disunity.

4) Competition and divisions between communities
A monk drew several diagrams to explain his perspective about the sources and the effects of communal tensions, pointing out that foreign NGOs, Thai NGOs and Government officials often did not communicate well among each other while working in the same areas. In his view, the community has been on the receiving end of multiple visitors, aid workers, assessments, explanations, promises and distributions. All of these actors brought different approaches and methods of working with affected populations and rarely exchanged information among each other.

For example, in the same village, some agencies chose to communicate only with the headman while others targeted the affected households directly. Some agencies offered their housing assistance in a way that split extended families into smaller, nuclear family units. The monk argued that assistance offered by multiple different actors caused competition, divisions and in his words, “removal of the community spirit,” because family members and neighbors were working with different “projects” and getting assorted benefits from various places. He concluded by saying that,

“Assistance should be provided in a holistic manner and target all neighboring communities and should not strengthen one over the other.”

One woman complained about the low level of community participation in her village’s steering committee, which was set up by NGOs who rebuilt their houses. She said that,

“Nobody wants to be on it because of all these tensions around distribution and jealousies. There are lots of negative feelings... new people in the community; there is no more communal spirit, and very empty hearts.”

Another monk told us that he had seen lots of proselytizing Christian “people and foundations.” He perceived this as yet another source of conflict between community members who benefited from assistance distributed by churches and those who chose to stay away.

Reflections of the Listening Team
The Listening Team members acknowledged that they are all challenged by the task of providing post-disaster relief assistance in a way that fosters rather than undermines equality, fairness and community relations. The issue of disparate quality and amounts of resources causing tensions was raised by many people and demands further attention. The large “caravan” of NGOs, or a
“ragtag army” as one team member described it, that arrived soon after the disaster included those that were well equipped with resources and specific expertise such as emergency assistance or housing construction. Others, while driven by good intentions, brought fewer resources and had considerably less experience in this region of the world and in humanitarian work. Therefore, from the start, what was on offer to communities was unequal. While many relief efforts are driven by the urgency and compassion for the affected population, several Listening Team members argued that if an agency does not have the expertise, it should not engage even when it can raise the resources.

The team discussed the comparative value of supporting and/or building more communal assets to reduce interpersonal competition and tensions, noting that leaving communal assets behind does not automatically unite community members and make them stronger or address individual needs. A more sensitive approach emphasizing trust-building might also be required, and could include consensus building and open dialogue with the community during the selection and implementation phases. This requires a certain level of skills and commitment on the part of the aid workers to facilitate and foster consensus, prevent communal conflicts and build relationships. The team discussed the fact that these skills are not widespread among international aid agency staff, but perhaps should be seen as essential to the work required in both disaster recovery and long-term development.

3. Unwelcome Effects of Assistance: Making Some People Lazy and Dependent

A number of aid recipients, non-recipients, community and religious leaders, school teachers and district officials expressed their concerns about some people becoming dependent and “lazy” due to the large amounts of “free” assistance. In several instances, people spoke of the excessive generosity of international agencies and said they received too much.

“People go to NGO offices and ask, ask, ask. All I needed was a house, a roof over my head and a way to make money again so that I can be independent and feed my family. People are becoming greedy and I think assistance is not really good for some people.”

A woman who was resettled to a newly built village

“The good thing is that they [NGOs] help people who really need help. The bad thing is that assistance makes some people lazy and they start expecting help and stop helping themselves.”

Two women selling fish in Takua Pa Market

“International assistance has had both positive and negative impacts on the livelihoods in local villages. Many international NGOs made available grants and donations to assist people in need. The help was very positive for people that wanted to become self-reliant. But we saw and heard of many others who have stopped working all together and were relying on free assistance. This makes people lazy and makes them put away their regular occupations. Some people have become so experienced and clever that they “shop” for assistance that can give them more things.”

School teacher in a school housing orphans and vulnerable children
“International NGOs should not be obsessed with reporting numbers. Why are you not looking at long-term impact? People are becoming lazy and relying on assistance too much.”

A development officer in a local district office

“Villagers who received lots of assistance kept expecting more and did not know when it would stop. They stopped working. Now they all realized that the international NGOs are decreasing their assistance or leaving altogether so people began gardening and working again.”

Sub-district Administrative Official

“There was too much assistance too fast, and international agencies should be slower in their distribution. People should help themselves first and only request and receive assistance when they cannot help themselves. By giving out so easily, you are turning them into beggars. Some villagers received too much to stop and think of the value of all the things they have been given. When people have been helped enough, they should say no thank you, but they don’t.”

Policeman in a local town

The same policeman also noted that one unintended negative impact from the sudden increase in material goods flown in from the outside has been an increase in crime.

“Because there are many more things to steal now,” he suggested that “assistance should aim to be more sustainable and it should train people rather than give things for free. There is too much emphasis on material things rather than building capacity or promoting education. If another tsunami comes, all materials things will be gone again, but education will stay.”

“NGOs should definitely come after such big disasters but try very hard to avoid building dependency – don’t come for small things and don’t stay distributing small things for a long time. NGOs should come and do analysis of the needs before providing things. You often give, and then start analyzing. Small things like medicine and food immediately after the crisis should be provided to help people survive, but for houses and boats, you need to take time to analyze and understand what is needed. I think you should focus on livelihoods first, help people replace their business incomes, because people can rebuild on their own. I did.”

A shopkeeper who received a small loan to rebuild his business

“The tsunami assistance that was given to our people was good for material development but detrimental to people’s minds and sense of independence.”

A monk in a small temple in Khuraburi district

“People have become lazy, they keep coming to the temple and asking for aid. NGOs helped a lot but when you start giving people things, they just want to get more and more. Our people should be more self-reliant and help themselves, not just depend on assistance. We have different kind of thinking, Thai people and foreigners, that’s why we need better communication. NGOs should make the community participate more and not just provide assistance, help people become sustainable and not raise expectations that NGOs will be here forever. People should help themselves and not just wait for foreigners. NGOs should
stop providing assistance now because they are not making any more major changes but are changing people’s way of thinking and creating dependency.”

A monk of the local Buddhist temple

Stories of Self-Reliance
In contrast to the above observations on increased dependency on outside assistance, we also heard and noted many important stories of self-reliance. Several people told us how they restored their damaged assets and livelihoods with little or no external assistance. One fisherwoman who restarted her business on her own told us that,

“I was too busy trying to recover my things and trying to survive and didn’t know about all these organizations until much later.” When asked if she would seek assistance next time she answered: “No. I would still help myself. I won’t wait for help. I think everyone should try to help themselves first and then seek assistance.”

Another fisherman told us that,

“Even if the NGOs would offer me a free boat now, I wouldn’t take it, why would I need two boats, I am just one person. I already built a boat with a loan though it was very difficult.”

These and other people used their personal stories to support their opinions that assistance should be given in a manner that supports what people are able to accomplish on their own.

Reflections of the Listening Team
Even during the relief and recovery period, Listening Team members suggested that assistance should be given with the aim of building and supporting local capacity and self-reliance, not weakening it. Some team members felt convinced that an increased focus on capacity-building, training and long-term development would result in decreasing dependency. The team discussed the fact that dependency has been created in a very short period of time since the tsunami. This was perceived, by the team members as well as the communities, as one of the undesirable impacts of a large and protracted international assistance effort. Recurring comments about “NGOs giving too much or too easily” and “there are too many NGOs” are certainly problematic and require our collective attention. Given these comments, it was remarkable to see and speak with individuals who exhibited a tremendous level of independence in rebuilding their lives and livelihoods, often in the midst of communities that received a lot of assistance.

4. Changes in people’s “Way of Life”

People described significant shifts in their lives and livelihoods that the tsunami, and the subsequent recovery and rebuilding efforts, have prompted. These changes in their “way of life” meant an improved quality of life for some, but a decline for others. Some of the most significant changes in livelihoods were brought up by resettled individuals and communities. People talked about how their “lives were turned upside down”: moving to new locations, getting new homes and neighbors, sending children to new schools, and adjusting to new communities and new livelihoods. Those who wanted to move away from the water out of fear of future disasters appreciated that housing was built for them in a new location, while many others who were resettled due to land ownership and property rights issues had less favorable experiences.
A few people raised concerns about the lack of psycho-social help for those deeply traumatized and needing this assistance.

We heard from several people that the types of assistance offered have had a great influence on people’s decisions to change their means of earning income. A group of villagers spoke about the impact of unsolicited assistance that they received, saying they used to work as day laborers before the tsunami. Then they received boats from an international agency and felt compelled to change their livelihoods to become fishermen. They noted there is now increased competition with the original fishermen in the area and one person remarked:

“We got too many boats and there are not enough people or fishing spots to go to. It’s a problem!”

One of the original fishermen in this same area said that,

“I think there are more boats than fish.”

In another community, people unaffected by the tsunami were given boats and they told us that the pier does not have enough space for all these boats as people received

“more of them than needed, and some are never used at all.”

A district official in another area brought up similar concerns about inappropriate livelihoods assistance that was on offer soon after the emergency phase was over. According to him, international NGOs suggested various training and skills-building opportunities and “new careers.” People were not sure what to take and thought being fishermen would bring more income, even though, as he said,

“There are not enough fish here for everyone to make an income.”

Several Moken families were given boats that were much larger than what they used before the tsunami. Their recollection of how this assistance was offered to them was:

“They just asked ‘what do you want?’ We said ‘a boat.’ They bought the wrong kind of boat, too large, too expensive, and we can’t fish with it...They should have asked for our opinion because it’s such a waste of money. They could have spent it on something better.”

Listening Team members saw several boats “parked” near people’s houses. In a few instances, families were using them as flower beds.

A number of people outside of the Moken community shared with us their concerns about the changes in the lives of the Moken people. A group of secondary school teachers told us, for example, that people in these communities used to be hard-working fishermen who led simple lives and were very poor. Now, they have improved their trading skills, but have also become much more materialistic and have left their “traditional ways” behind (e.g. they do not build boats anymore) to engage in petty trade. When asked why they perceive this as a negative development, the teachers responded by saying,

“It is hard to say that international assistance did this. A big disaster brings with it lots of changes. Many people had to change their livelihoods after the tsunami. The Moken probably like living in bigger houses, but their culture is changing.”
A district official in one of the worst hit coastal areas commented on the positive impact the large amount of internationally-funded housing construction projects has had on the living standards of migrant Burmese workers. These migrants work as day laborers and charge less for their services, and as a result, they have been regularly employed on the construction sites. A project coordinator for a migrant health project told the Listening Team:

“We see the impact of international assistance on the Burmese community. The migrants are more active now than before and they are using services at the clinic, sending children to school and participating in decision-making about the work that is done for their community.”

Reflections of the Listening Team
Considering the dramatic changes in their livelihoods and “way of life,” the Listening Team wondered why many people referred to the post-tsunami stage as “the process of rebuilding and getting back into normal life,” whereas for so many it has meant “building a brand new life altogether.” We questioned whether or not international assistance has been supportive enough to people whose lives have been so deeply affected by the disaster, noting that some people who lost their entire families were still traumatized, and the teams were surprised that we did not hear much more about psycho-social support. As for concerns about livelihoods options that were inappropriate or detrimental to the environment, the team wondered ourselves why the relief and recovery efforts are not doing a better job supporting sustainable livelihoods.

5. Expectations, Promises and Gaps in Communication

Very few people that we listened to had experience with international NGOs prior to the tsunami, and many did not anticipate the arrival of international humanitarian relief agencies.

“We didn’t even expect assistance and were surprised to receive visitors so soon. We moved away from water and immediately started talking about rebuilding, borrowing money, making temporary shelter.”

An elderly woman in a coastal village

“I never heard of NGOs before. After the tsunami I saw and heard about a lot of NGOs but didn’t expect any assistance. These NGOs, so many of them, came to help and that’s incredible. I don’t think they expect anything from us, do they?”

A woman selling fish in the Takua Pa market

“We’ve never before had assistance and we didn’t even know that we were supposed to go to temporary camps. We learned later that all that aid was given out near the road. We had no expectation and no information.”

A large Muslim family in a remote coastal village in Khuraburi

“We never expected any kind of assistance from organizations or even from our Government. We thought we would have to be scraping for food and only had ourselves to rely on to slowly build things back. We didn’t even know how to go ask for assistance. You know who benefited the most? Those who lived near the road, who had more time on their hands, who
talked to NGOs first – they got lots of stuff. We were busy trying to recover pieces of our boats here in the water.”

A group of fishermen that has since formed a committee to communicate with international and local agencies

On Needs Assessments Raising Expectations

One prominent issue raised by many people had to do with what the community perceived as “promises” made by the agencies that came to assess the damage and needs, and to discuss new projects with people. In one example, a woman who lost her daughter in the tsunami and had since been resettled to a new location, told us she did not like the way agencies came and promised things and never contacted her again. On one occasion, she said an officer of a “women’s foundation” came to take her picture and documentation, promising to support her fishing business. A year had gone by and no one had returned with any assistance or information. She said conversations like this gave her hope, but that the lack of follow-through hurt her feelings. Another woman told us that some “foundation” told the village they would come back regularly to follow-up on a livelihoods project, but never did. She has called them several times, but they have not responded to her phone calls.

Most people expressed disappointment about aid agency staff who rarely returned to discuss their decisions with them.

“We thought we had a good solution: a community meeting with a few of their staff and the headman to look at needs and make lists. We had that a few times, we signed papers, but some of them never came back.” She speculated that this happens because: “They went to other places to work where people are more helpless, maybe? But they never said anything to us. Another meeting or some announcement would have been more respectful.”

A woman shopkeeper in Bang Rai

“They probably really wanted to help. We gave them all the information about our needs, lost income, livelihoods and needed supplies. But perhaps they found people who are worse-off and thought that we can help ourselves. I understand this. But it would be so much better if they came back and told us this and informed us of their decision. When they don’t, we are left waiting and hoping, after all we gave them so much information.”

A group of local people employed by a national park office

“Some NGOs came and asked what we need and disappeared. I don’t know why they don’t come back. Maybe other people need more help than I do. I want to know this because it helps me be more organized and knowledgeable next time.”

A woman in a Nam Khem village

One community really appreciated when an international agency sent its Thai-speaking staff to verify the information provided by the headman. People commended the staff for collecting important information about each household during the relief operation in the nearby temporary camp, which meant that later they did not distribute the “same things.” One woman said,
“More NGOs should work that way. This helps us feel important and recognized, and it is better to work with people in emergency situations in this way so that we can plan together how to recover our things and get better economically.”

The “needs assessment” process was very familiar to most people we spoke to because they had participated in numerous assessments in the past two and a half years. People also talked about the conversations that they have had with NGO personnel about “choices and options.” One person recommended that the choices and options given by relief agencies should be well-informed:

“The most important thing is information – a lot of the assistance was misguided because of very brief and incomplete needs assessments, [and] information changes. Also, people are often asked what they want, but not what they need. These are two different things.”

Another suggested that agencies should do a careful analysis of the local culture and economic situation before helping:

“For example, if you see people who walk with bare feet, it doesn’t mean that they need shoes. It might be their tradition to walk with bare feet and they’ve done it for ages.”

“People’s wants will never be satisfied and they are unlimited. Helping people’s needs has a limit and at some point the community can take care of itself.”

A monk in a local temple in Khuraburi

**Reflections of the Listening Team**

The communities in the tsunami-affected areas had not been exposed to an extensive presence of international agencies, and people had limited experience and understanding of what disaster relief work meant, what it aimed to accomplish, and how to interact with relief agencies. In addition, many relief agencies that arrived soon after the tsunami lacked on-the ground experience in Thailand and had no prior history working with the local government or communities. Those international NGOs who had prior experience working in other parts of Thailand seemed to better understand the local context and carried out more comprehensive needs assessments than the newcomers.

People’s perceptions of the failure to deliver on promises made by international agencies should be of concern. The international presence and information gathering process clearly raised expectations in an unintended way. We heard a number of people asking for a more “respectful” way of engaging with the communities and this resonated with the Listening Team members as a principle that should be fundamental in all interventions, however brief. While we did not hear people speak at length about accountability gaps on the part of international organizations, team members thought it important to consider what existing accountability mechanisms are not being fully employed, and what new ways of collecting and acting on and providing community feedback need to be put in place.

**6. Coordination**

People spoke a lot about how international agencies work with local governments and communities, and how they coordinate (or not) among each other while providing assistance in
the same areas. They pointed out several examples of good coordination and communication between NGOs:

“We feel so lucky that they were able to find us and they brought us everything: houses, water and sanitation help, electricity, even scholarships for our children. The first agency that came told others to come here too because they saw how poor we were even before the tsunami.”

A family in a remote village that had no electricity before the tsunami

“A representative from our community went to talk to the [NGO] people and told them about problems we are facing and the size of the [NGO] houses being too small. They came and checked and brought this other NGO to expand on the houses. More NGOs should work together like this if they can’t alone provide us with what we need.”

A family resettled into a newly built village

Medical staff in one hospital spoke positively of a well-coordinated and collaborative working experience they had with two international agencies on a variety of projects, including one focused on children’s protection and rights. The hospital staff had initiated a planning and preparation process for future disasters informed by its past mistakes and the coordination effort they took part in. A medical officer there said:

“There was no center before to manage the requests for assistance but now we have it. After the tsunami, this hospital is linked with other hospitals and we exchange patient information.”

People also discussed cases of poor coordination and offered suggestions on how it could have been done better. Many people who have been “asked the same questions many times” were dismayed at how little communication and how much competition there seemed to be between agencies that provided assistance in the same villages.

“NGOs are fighting for the same beneficiaries and the most affected people, because it is better for their reports and for their donors. They don’t talk to each other. Don’t bring your conflicts and tensions here.”

A Buddhist monk

Several district officials told us that a number of international agencies began providing assistance in the area without contacting local government offices. One development officer was concerned about his inability to follow-up on additional requests from villages since he could not verify what had already been provided. He suggested that assistance should be channeled through the local government, but admitted that the current staffing level does not allow for such a huge financial responsibility.

“NGOs should never bypass us and go straight to the communities. We need to sit down and discuss the assistance and determine the beneficiaries.”

Local government official in Takua Pa District
“NGOs don’t work with the district which would be so much better because we have information about families. They are missing some people this way. The local government has a small budget, but together, if we put our resources and information together, it would be better for everyone.”

Another district official in Khuraburi

“First they built houses, then they asked for our permission to put people in these houses – but the construction was without our permission and it was on private property. Now we are dealing with huge problems with land rights between the original owners, new residents, and our district. Even in the best case scenario, if we can negotiate this now, some of these new residents would have to leave this place in 20 years.”

A district official commenting on an area where a new village was built

One prominent community leader who had recently become a shrimp farmer was baffled by international NGOs who bypassed local authorities. He described to us a scene of total chaos after the disaster with hundreds of people arriving to ask for assistance each day. He helped set up an emergency coordination office to register all the requests and collect information, but agencies bypassed this office and went straight to the communities. In his opinion, the Thai Government is not doing enough to require foreign agencies to register with and work through local authorities. He pointed out both pluses and minuses of the current way of doing things: aid gets to communities faster, but in the long run there is often duplication or gaps in assistance. He was critical of agencies that relied on local headmen and believed that setting up steering committees in each village could improve transparency and coordination. He also suggested that the tremendous amount of expertise and resources that internationals brought with them could have a larger impact if NGOs collaborated and

“pull their skills together, because they are good at different things.”

One very frequent suggestion given by people who discussed coordination challenges was a center that would collect and share information, coordinate the activities of local and international NGOs, and link them with government efforts. Some people thought this center would be best placed at a district office but supported by foreign funds. Others who expressed less trust in their local authorities suggested that it be set up and run by NGOs with access to information from the Government.

Reflections of the Listening Team
The analysis offered by people points to the multiple effects of poor coordination, including duplication of efforts, confusion in the communities, gaps in assistance and weakening of the role of local authority. The Listening Team reflected on the suggestion for a coordination center and felt that for such a center to be most effective, it would need to be run in conjunction with a government office, and with foreign financial support where necessary. We thought that international assistance should strive to build the capacity of the local government and encourage better relationships between communities and government, rather than worsen existing strains. Listening Team members noted that timing is crucial, and therefore a center would need to be set up within a few days after the disaster to gather and verify information from a variety of sources: survivors, journalists, temples, hospitals and local NGOs who routinely work in the area.
The Listening Team members were concerned about the fact that the worst affected areas were seen as an “NGO battleground” by some people we spoke to, who often speculated that NGOs compete with each other to provide assistance to the most “visible” beneficiaries. We know that most agencies come with good intentions, but not always with enough knowledge and capacity. Many foreign agencies bring tremendous amounts of cash and resources, which are easily raised after a disaster, and this often causes problems to NGOs who are already established and better prepared to provide assistance. Team members noted that good coordination is also impeded by donor restrictions that limit the scope and range of assistance and types of beneficiaries. Team members acknowledged that another factor contributing to haphazard coordination is that the Thai Government regulations on gaining access to communities are not properly enforced.

Donor agencies have invested funds into coordination of tsunami relief efforts and there is a critical need to identify and address the real obstacles to effective coordination. However, coordination for the sake of coordination does not automatically bring better results. The team noted that coordinating around a bad strategy or an inappropriate response is not helpful either.

7. Decision-making and Priorities

On Desiring More Participation
Many people expressed the desire to have more say and to play a larger role in the recovery, rebuilding and long-term development projects initiated by international NGOs on their behalf. For some people, this larger role meant physically participating in the reconstruction of their homes.

“We built our own houses, the NGOs just gave us construction supplies and we are happy we could choose our own style.”

Head of household in a Muslim community

“I will be the one living in this house and I should have a role in building it and making decisions. They brought construction materials that I couldn’t afford, but I didn’t sit around while they built, I helped them.”

Woman in Laem Pom village

“We want to participate more, and next time NGOs should engage the community so that we feel part of the recovery. International aid agencies shouldn’t manage but support people’s recovery.”

Family in Ao Khoi beach

“NGOs always come and ask but only from the headman or the head of this market. You should come get your information directly from us. Sub-district office people baby-sit people in the village. I understand that your staff needs to talk to district people, but they are not our parents, we can make decisions for ourselves!”

Fisherwoman in Bang Niang Market

“If international assistance did not come, the community would not have been able to rebuild and recover on its own. However, the good thing about not having too many international
NGOs is that the local population would feel more ownership of the recovery process and rely on themselves, on the local NGOs and on the local government, which is very important for long-term sustainability.”

A local field officer for an internationally funded migrant health project

**On Setting Priorities**

Others saw participation as “being asked and listened to” in the initial process of determining priorities and making informed decisions together with agencies.

“We don’t have internet here, so we can’t request assistance that we actually need and foreigners bring what they think we need. We have no input in these decisions. A lot of the medicine that was donated was already expired or very close to expiration date. We were afraid to use the expired medicine and we threw them away. I personally felt very bad about throwing away medicine.”

Medical officer in a coastal clinic

One woman told us that the agency that had initially built houses in their village returned and said they could build 40 more houses if there was land. She exclaimed: “But there are not 40 families who need houses!” The woman offered her opinion on why such situations took place:

“We think these NGOs have a lot of money donated to them and they are trying to help but we don’t need houses anymore.” Her neighbor added, “There is only one time we saw staff of one of these international NGOs come and meet us – they came to unveil the sign about their funding here. We haven’t seen anyone that belongs to that sign since then.”

Some people said that agencies that did not engage the community in decision-making often ended up providing inappropriate livelihoods projects, such as a crochet project with no local market, or income generating activities that did not consider local seasonal employment cycles. This was exacerbated by the fact that most foreign staff of agencies had very poor knowledge of the local context and did not speak the local language. One woman suggested:

“You should let us participate in everything so that we can give correct information. For example, ask us what we are good at. When you come with livelihood projects you should ask us what we would like to do. Many NGOs came but they never asked us and they set up a basket weaving training, but not many people are using it right now and don’t know what to do with the supplies.”

**Priorities: Housing vs. Livelihoods**

People differed over what kind of assistance had the most significant impact and contributed the most to their long-term security. There was no consensus when it came to prioritizing housing assistance versus livelihoods or cash assistance.

“We would have preferred to get cash help to rebuild our houses – we could have rebuilt the way we want and save up cash for fishing equipment, business expenses, clothe. But they never offered.”

A husband and wife, shopkeepers
“It would have been so much more useful if the assistance was focused on helping us stand on our feet and get our income back. You see we rebuilt for ourselves, it is possible, but so much better with help that is appropriate.”

A woman who has rebuilt her own house

“Cash assistance was most useful and it allowed me to buy the most important things. If I have a house, but no boat, I can’t survive. If I have a boat but no cash for gasoline or fishing equipment, I can’t survive either.”

A fisherwoman in Takua Pa Market

“Livelihoods assistance is most useful. I am taking care of myself and getting my life back together. I could have built a house myself if my income was restored fast. Now I live in a house of poor quality. But it’s still nice that they built it.”

Another fisherwoman in Takua Pa Market

“A house is physical assistance that stays and can be accounted for. I understand why NGOs prefer to build houses.”

A male teacher, in a small school in a rebuilt village

Livelihoods support was seen as especially useful for people who rent houses, as in the case of one woman who said

“It is the most important thing because if we have income we can rent a house, pay for electricity and be independent.”

Some people who were helped with houses have been unemployed for more than a year. They have a house to live in, but no income as they lost all their fishing equipment in the tsunami. Some of them live in poorly constructed houses that “shake during the storm.” Conversely, there were many people, particularly the elderly, infirm and single mothers, who said that the housing assistance was crucial for their recovery and sense of security, and that they would not have been able to build houses themselves.

**Reflections of the Listening Team**

Communities appreciated the rapid delivery of emergency assistance in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. However, in the subsequent phase of recovery and rebuilding, many people felt “rushed” by agencies that provided assistance without taking the time to understand their priorities and preferences. Many NGOs felt compelled to spend funds quickly and visibly, and what better way to do that than to build houses and boats that you can take pictures of and report to your donors?

One Listening Team member observed that no international assistance effort can completely satisfy everyone’s needs and that there are multiple restrictions as to what agencies can provide. Communities are rarely aware of these restrictions and many have requested more information in order to understand their options better. People want to be treated respectfully and want to engage in the decision-making about projects that directly or indirectly affect their lives. Team members wondered: can we afford to ask and discuss with everyone? How do communities
want to be involved in decision-making? What does participation mean to us and what does it mean to the community? Does participation always lead to ownership and sustainability?

People often distinguished and commented on different types of participation which were seen by the Listening Team as a sequence of interventions: listening (consultation), planning (decision-making), and participation (implementation). International development agencies are generally committed to engaging communities in participatory processes along this continuum. However, in the disaster relief and recovery stage, this commitment is often put to the test by the urgency of the situation. It is clear that communities are requesting more opportunities to give their input on decisions and the implementation of projects, especially where they can expect long-term impacts from changing locations and livelihoods.

The range of preferences and priorities expressed by a small sample of people we spoke to points to the vast differences in circumstances and needs that have to be accounted for and integrated into project planning and design. Agencies clearly need to understand the local context better. The Listening Teams felt that NGOs can be more efficient at learning about the needs of communities by holding joint meetings in the communities to save everyone’s time, and to approach the communities in a more organized manner.

8. Presence of international NGOs and continuity

Many people mentioned that NGOs should always come back and follow-up on what they’ve started. Most people appreciated the fact that some agencies stayed beyond the relief phase to teach them “new careers” and to help them “stand on their feet.” However, some of these requests for follow-up were accompanied by stories of livelihoods projects that trained people in a new trade but not on how to market or sell whatever they were producing.

“We are welcoming people, we don’t mind if NGOs stay longer in the area and keep their eye on their projects and things they funded.”

Fisherman who has been resettled to a new village

“NGOs should stay longer so that they can follow-up on what they gave and to check if some people need anything else.”

Fisherwoman in a local market

“International assistance comes faster but leaves the area quicker. Government and local NGO assistance is slower but stays in the area longer.”

A local district official in Thai Muang

One monk offered advice to the international agencies on measuring their impact:

“NGOs should come back after and always look at how much impact they have had on the community and measure their success based on how sustainable the community is and not just by counting how many things they built and distributed.”
“Many foreign staff of NGOs showed up to take a picture when the medical donation was brought in. But we didn’t see them on a regular basis. We haven’t seen anyone ever since the last donation a while ago. I’d rather they just come to us and listen.”

Medical officer in a small clinic in Nam Khem

“International organizations like to make their help visible. Some people have bad things to say about this. But I think it is a good thing to have the rebuilt houses marked by the donor names. It shows exactly who provided the help, who built the house and also allows the donor agency staff to easily identify their past beneficiaries when they come back to bring additional help. We are proud to display the names of donors on each dormitory that they paid for. It helps to keep the relationship, we hope.”

A female school teacher

Many people suggested that the remaining NGOs think about their long-term plans and projects, and to help people to “stand on their own.”

“The best thing NGOs could do now with leftover funds is debt relief for these people to help repay their debts and help them stand on their feet again.”

A locally-based German business owner

“Our government should take care of its people. There are too many foreign NGOs here.”

A Buddhist monk

A few other people had divergent opinions about continuing the “presence” of NGOs in local communities. One person said that “NGO activities disrupt our work and daily life,” explaining that there are too many similar “activities” that happen in the same area.

9. Transparency and Accountability

A number of people said they would like to know how the funds and other resources that were allocated for their area have been used.

“We know there was much money and things given to Thailand, we saw it on TV. But look around you, if a percentage of the funds were given here, you would perhaps see a different picture. We’d like to ask all these foundations where the money went and how it was spent.”

Another person said, “Where did all the money go, there was lots given for this area, but we don’t know if it came here.”

Fisherman at a pier in a village in Khuraburi

“With such a large effort that was so well funded, it could have been better and made a larger impact.”

Staff person at a health clinic

“There are problems here in our villages that create problems for your work, for example, corruption on a local level. But people also say this about NGOs too. There was a lot of
Issues about accountability and transparency were brought up in connection with the way international agencies work with the local government offices without attempting to influence their practices.

“I heard from news how much money the whole world gave to Thailand. We are so grateful for so much attention. But I think when it got here unfortunately there was a lot of corruption and mismanagement. Maybe NGOs could work with our government in a stricter way when they give our government assistance.”

Local employee at a national park office

Regional Report from Si Sa Ket, in eastern Thailand

Five Listening Teams, made up of local staff from Plan International Thailand and RaksThai, as well as the CDA consultant, participated in the listening exercise in this area. Over the course of three days, the Listening Teams held 51 conversations with around 135 people in villages west and south of Si Sa Ket town, including one village that straddled the border with Cambodia.

A Note on the Context in Si Sa Ket Province

Si Sa Ket Province, in eastern Thailand, shares a border with Cambodia. The majority of inhabitants are rice farmers, and the people in the province represent four ethnic groups: Kuay, Khmer, Lao and Yer. The UNDP Human Development Report lists Si Sa Ket among the 5 lowest provinces in terms of economic and health indicators. Human trafficking and access to water and sanitation are other major challenges facing people this area.

Si Sa Ket Province has not had a lengthy history of international development assistance compared to other provinces, and the two participating agencies began their work in the province in the last five years, largely focusing on child-centered community development, health and education projects. However during the war in Cambodia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were refugee camps set up in this area and many different international relief agencies provided assistance to the Cambodian refugees.

WHAT WE HEARD

Given that there has not been very much international assistance in this area, when people were asked about development or international assistance, they spoke of all development projects as originating in some capacity from the Government. They did not speak of distinctions between assistance provided by the Thai Government and that provided by local or international NGOs. Rather, they grouped all assistance together. The following themes emerged from the conversations.
1. Expectations

Many people shared their expectations of what development or international assistance should provide.

“Development is to make life better.”
A middle-aged woman

“To make development better, [we] must help ourselves [and] not just wait for [a] development project.”
A woman in a village

“Development must provide continuous training and marketable products.”
A female elected community leader

In order to “make life better,” many people referred to improving education and increasing income-generating opportunities as the appropriate goals for development. People believe that education is a path towards development for individuals, families and communities, and that any development or international assistance should help to alleviate the barriers to education. Access to opportunities was also discussed as an endpoint for development projects, with an increase in opportunities allowing people to develop themselves and to be self-sufficient. Some people commented that education, income-generation and development projects are better now than in past generations.

In every village, people said that families and communities would be stronger if people did not need to migrate for jobs. In villages where a majority of inhabitants had to migrate to earn an income to support their families, people spoke of families falling apart and communities disappearing. Many people said that good development brings more money, which decreases the need to migrate, thereby resulting in stronger families and communities. They said that no development, or bad development, necessitates migration and the separation of families and of communities.

In situations where families move, students have to leave school to move with their families. Many villages are mostly populated by elders and youth now. An older woman in a village said, “Development allows people to stay in their community, not to migrate...I would like to have anything to keep youth in this area.”

People identified some other negative impacts from the lack of local development efforts, noting that there has been an increase in alcohol and drug abuse. Others said that people have accumulated vast debts in order to obtain goods that they believe are necessary, and that there has also been a significant breakdown in culture in some areas.

2. Community Participation

When discussing participation, people felt that all members of a community should take part in decision-making processes. A young male shopkeeper expressed the notion that if you do
business for everybody, you must ask everyone’s opinion. The success of his community’s shop, in which all community members participated in the development, implementation and proceeds, is his proof that participation by all is necessary for sustainability. He said, “[a] better thing is to discuss before asking for the budget. People have to discuss what to do and what they need.”

One woman stated that, “Unity of community is [the] first thing to make things go well. Without unity of community, nothing can be done well.”

Some people spoke of requesting improved roads, sufficient funds for elderly or programs to involve adolescents and youth. While these people had approached their elected and government officials, their requests were ignored or denied, thereby leaving them to wonder at the decisions being made to spend money on alternate projects.

Since Si Sa Ket is primarily inhabited by ethnic minorities speaking different dialects, they often had less access to development opportunities. In the past, there has also been a problem with unregistered births which prevents people from accessing health and other services. Fortunately, birth registration has improved recently, but the poorest and most vulnerable populations are sometimes denied rights of representation or participation in development efforts. Some people also spoke of individual characteristics such as age and disability, which prevented them from participating.

People in one village told of a construction project for a reservoir, saying that people who had resources, such as money and land, requested the reservoir be built to improve irrigation to their crops. A dam was built and a reservoir created, which in turn meant that those people who lived in the low-lying areas, who were without the same resources, no longer had access to water. Those from these low-lying areas felt that other people’s priorities were placed above their needs since they lacked participation in the decision-making process. As one village member noted, “The poorest do not have money or land to participate in decision-making, and that without resources, our input is not solicited.”

Many people reported that there are too many situations in which “top-down” decision-making is done and the choices made are not the best for the community members. A lack of trust and problems with corruption were also mentioned by some as limiting their participation, noting that: “Benefits don’t go to [the] poorest, but go to elected leaders and their relatives.”

Many people felt that decisions are being made without any representation from the community. As such, the communities lack the power of negotiation and feel that others are making decisions on their behalf without seeking their input. There is also a sense that development project staff do not give all or adequate information on the full and potential impact of the projects they plan to implement. People noted that this lack of information lends itself to a lack of sustainability, as well as the possibility of inappropriate or perhaps even destructive projects.

3. Appropriate Assistance
People said that projects must be suitable, which people defined as being appropriate for the local culture, climate and daily life. One woman spoke of attending a training that demonstrated a successful project in another region. However, that same project was not suitable for the climate and resources that existed within her village, and thus this seemed a waste of time to her.

Members of one village spoke of the detrimental effects of agricultural development projects which were supported with international assistance. People were trained to use chemicals and pesticides to improve their agricultural output, but the use of these chemicals resulted in problems with the local water supply and significant health problems.

One man who had never received any development assistance was proud to be self-sufficient. He observed that globalization had come with development, and that this had been destructive to the culture and relationships (among and between communities). He suggested that projects must be suitable and community members need to provide input in deciding which projects to implement.

Some people talked about collaboration between different agencies -- or the lack of it. Some expressed that if agencies were better at collaborating and communicating with each other, then perhaps development assistance projects would be more evenly distributed among those people and communities that are in need. One elected official suggested “a monitoring system to ensure that agencies were doing what they in fact were charged to do.”

Many of our conversations included references to the Government’s Million Baht Scheme. We heard from many individuals that they have been given no guidance on this scheme, and that they do not know what to do or how to access it. They are scared of accumulating debt, and so the majority of funds are underutilized.

**Reflections of the Listening Team**

The Listening Team noted the importance of knowing and understanding the community context to ensure that development efforts are culturally sensitive and appropriate, as well as timely and responsive to the socio-economic changes in communities. The Listening Team also discussed the value of evaluating the full impact of development efforts on communities by asking questions about cumulative impacts and learning about how policies and programs are affecting people’s lives on a larger scale. It is clear that existing project-focused impact assessments do not capture the complexity of the overall experience communities have with development interventions.

The Listening Team agreed unequivocally that community participation is vital at all phases of a program cycle, noting that the challenge lies in identifying all the relevant stakeholders and fostering a collaborative atmosphere and joint decision-making process. They noted that they and other staff of development agencies need to also seek out information about other resources available in the area, such as the Government-led lending scheme and to design projects that complement similar development efforts.
It was interesting that the Listening Teams did not hear anything about long-term effects on local communities from the presence of the refugee camps and assistance which were provided to the Cambodian refugees in this area over 20 years ago.

**Regional Report from Khon Kaen, in northeast Thailand**

Three teams of “listeners,” each composed of two members, one female and one male, represented two agencies: Plan International Thailand and the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperative (BAAC), along with the CDA consultant. The Listening Teams held 33 conversations with around 67 people over the course of three days. The Listening Teams visited six villages in Phuwiang District in Khon Kaen province, and Sri Boonruang District in Nongbua Lamphu Province.

**A Note on the Context**

The primary source of income for most households in this region is rice farming and cash crops such as kenaf (hibiscus) and cassava, grown mostly for export. The boom in cassava farming dramatically accelerated the forest destruction in the area.

A number of international and local assistance agencies have implemented development programs for many years, focusing on strengthening communal capacity for development, environmental preservation, HIV/AIDS prevention and education assistance for children. Since 2001, the majority of development programs have been implemented by the Government with some funding from multilateral and bilateral donors, including micro-credit and other lending schemes.

**WHAT WE HEARD**

Since this area has received development assistance from both the national Government and several local and international NGOs over many years, people made many comparisons between the types of assistance and approaches taken by the Government and NGOs.

When discussing the impacts of outside assistance, people identified the following prominent issues which, in their opinion, all development assistance needs to address: sustainable livelihoods, the effects of migration, debt, natural resources, child abuse, HIV/AIDS, disability and drugs. The majority of young and able people migrate in the dry season, as there is no alternative work in the surrounding area.

1. **Effects of Access to Credit**

Many people were concerned about the high rates of indebtedness in the area. One woman estimated that 9 out of 10 people in her village were in debt. Another woman noted that “some people have multiple debts; they borrow from one money lender to pay off other debts to others.”
Some said that people used the borrowed money for unproductive gains, leaving them further in debt. As one woman said,

“They borrow money to buy a cow and end up buying cow meat” or “They borrow money for their field and use the money to buy rice.”

Many people said that they were happy that micro-credit provided an alternative to borrowing from a middleman who charged high interest. As one woman said,

“This has released us from the non-formal credit system where the interest rates are very high.”

This sentiment was voiced by many people. The loans provided by international agencies and through the Government gave them an alternative income source in the dry season, and allowed them to stay home and not have to migrate for work.

Some people were very happy with the revolving fund that had been set up in their village, saying that it brought many advantages to the community including a social welfare fund, which they had no access to before, noting that

“It has made our community stronger.”

However, some members of credit groups complained that management of their income depends on the managers of the groups, and that often group leaders dominate and monopolize the funds. Many confirmed that there was a lack of discipline among members in repaying their loans and depositing their savings. A woman from a micro credit group said,

“We lost our confidence on how to proceed and this had led to lack of trust and conflict between the members.”

Some people said that where there is lack of repayment of loans to savings and credit groups, the groups stop operating and then there are bad feelings in the community. As one member of a savings group noted,

“Due to secrecy in the committees and lack of transparency, there is conflict in the community.”

Some women from a credit and savings group said that more young people should be encouraged to participate, noting that is the only way these groups will keep working:

“We are all getting old now; we need to have a new generation to replace us.”

A chairman of a saving group, voicing a concern raised by many people about the over reliance on loans, said,

“We need more factories around here, so our children do not have to go away and leave their children with us. For us old ones, it is like having children all over again at our old age. We love our grandchildren, so we will look after them, but it would be better if our children can live here.”

A bank manager who approves small-scale loans for agriculture purposes said,

“Before, people were individualistic. We are trying to help them as a group. Solving problems as an individual is difficult; you have stronger bargaining power working as
Two spiritual leaders noted that, “we have become a consumer society, production is low, and we need to teach self-sufficiency. We are the trees and children are the future seedling and flowers. The problems originate from adults, children imitate adults. We need a good society of adults which will influence children.”

Reflections of the Listening Team
The Listening Team members questioned why micro-credit programs do not more intentionally target younger people who face unemployment and are compelled to migrate to bigger cities for jobs, with some being trafficked into the sex trade. They noted that these loan programs have not done enough to prepare the community to plan ahead and to support their livelihoods without increased indebtedness, and that external loans are often seen as someone else’s money. One Listening Team member introduced the concept of “cold money” (funds coming in from the outside) and “hot money” (funds mobilized by the community). He said that people are less careful about the “cold money” coming from outside as it is not their money, leaving many people in debt.

Listening Team members who were themselves aid workers acknowledged that they spend less and less time preparing communities and building capacity, and that this is seen as time intensive by many project and government staff. The team members agreed that the lead-in time for projects should be much longer, but there is not enough human capacity in the aid agencies as the staffing levels have dwindled. They noted that it is easy to make money available to communities, but helping people think through the challenges, teaching them financial management and accounting, and developing business plans is much harder.

2. Approaches of the Government vs. International Assistance Agencies

Government-led Programs
People noted that NGOs had different regulations compared to the Government in terms of accessing resources, and that it was harder and more bureaucratic to access Government funding. These regulations and the process were not always clear to the villagers. People said that the Government departments ordered people to do things and wanted people to follow the orders, whereas the NGOs worked with people through processes. One person contrasted the approaches, saying “NGOs do not show their muscles, government officials show their muscles.”

Many people felt they participated in the Government development activities, but did not participate in the decision making processes about the activities. One example was given where the community members were told by the Government department that they would like to implement an environmental programme. They asked the villagers to clear land to grow trees, and the villagers had to clear paddy fields to make way for eucalyptus trees. The roots of these trees are known to kill other trees, and now the villagers have had no benefits from having these trees. One chief of a village stated,
“If the Government wants to do something, it should ask the people first, not tell them what to do.”

Some people said that in the last few years, since the One Million Baht Scheme has been introduced, there has been no guidance or assistance in the utilization of this fund. Some were of the opinion that this was “money dumping,” while others called it “money laundering” and others called it “vote buying.” Many people talked about the need to “prepare” the community before providing funds.

“It [Government] should prepare the community; it should not only be a giver but a capacity builder.”

Member of a community group

Few villagers used this fund because they did not know how to come up with a business plan. People said that sometimes committee members were asked to come up with a plan in one month.

“Sometimes groups are formed just to access the money, without community preparation or planning. So we all scrambled to put something together, without longer reflection on what is needed for longer term development.”

A female chairman of an agriculture group

Others said that they were afraid of getting into more debt. Some communities have taken advantage of the fund and started a micro-credit programme, but have had little success because the rate of repayment is not very good and they did not know how to deal with defaulters.

Most people were of the opinion that NGOs and other organisations are faster at project implementation than the Government. For instance, people made comments such as: “Government departments promise but do not deliver,” the “Government sector is far behind NGOs in regard to assistance,” and “They are good at lip service, but not with delivery.”

One bank manager confirmed that there needs to be a change in the way of thinking and an integrated plan and joint work between the community and the Government departments of environment, agriculture and development. He noted that the district budget does not address the real development challenges, and that the Government concentrates on buildings and roads, instead of the problems with natural resources and employment. He suggested that “communities need to present their needs to motivate government departments.”

International Assistance Efforts
Some people felt that the NGO-led development processes were more participatory than those led by the Government agencies. People noted that in some NGO-led programs, the community was involved from the start in the processes of planning, identification and decision making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Some said that there was engagement of the whole family, and many felt that the process of participation creates ownership and that these were the programs that were most successful. They said that other programs failed due to lack of ownership.
People noted that some international NGOs took time to prepare the community before providing them funding for activities. They helped the community to reflect on the development of the whole community and to prioritise activities. The community felt that this helped build capacity of the villagers to look at their own development. Some people mentioned that while the process of preparation was time intensive, it was worth it in the end. Lately there is an effort towards preparing community development plans, and some villages have already been through this process and were very happy with it. They said that,

“the preparation had built our capacity and now we are able to manage things on our own.”

Two school teachers gave an example of how an international NGO project helped set-up a committee in which school children, teachers, parents and the community took part, and that this had also created ownership. One stated that they were very proud of the results they had achieved, saying,

“Today we are famous and exceptional because we have received training and management; it opened up opportunities for us. We are now famous in the district. We have been appointed spokesman and resource people for the district.”

A group of HIV/AIDS affected young people said that they were happy because they were able to decide on the project they wanted, organize themselves and receive assistance from an NGO to help them to form a network. The only drawback was that it took almost one year to approve the livelihood project. They were still happy as the project gave them an opportunity for alternative livelihoods, allowing them to stay in the area to receive their medication and other assistance. They said the project also gave them confidence in their own abilities.

Many people in the area had taken part in donor-supported study trips which showed them different activities that their groups could start. People found these really useful and said that it gave them options for alternative and additional incomes during the dry season. These trips increased their knowledge and gave them opportunities to see what other groups have been doing in different regions. It also helped because they did not have to migrate for work and they could also work from home and help to look after children and grandchildren.

However, the majority of people said there was poor follow-up and monitoring of projects. They noted that NGO-supported projects were better monitored than government projects, but there was still room for improvement. The micro-credit groups said that although they received training and attended study trips to learn about the different kinds of enterprises they could establish, when they returned home it was not easy to start the activities. Sometimes they were successful, but as soon as they came across a problem which they did not know how to solve, the activity stopped. One woman said that,

“We had no one to turn to for advice; we had difficulty in finding markets for our products and did not know how to go about marketing our products.”

One health official said that it was great that

“we get help from people. We need it, but sometimes it is better that it does not come with conditions. We were donated an ambulance by [a bilateral donor] which was really good for us and indirectly benefited the community. The only issue was that it was stipulated that the
ambulance must be a specific make, a Volvo. Maintenance for this kind of vehicle is very high. If they really want to help they should not have this kind of condition.”

Many people said that some of the activities were not sustainable and that they did not know how they would cope if the projects closed down, while people in a couple of villages said that they were very proud of what they had achieved and had sufficient knowledge to continue with the projects. A Monk who has been working on development of the community was very sceptical about international assistance. He asked the question

“How sustainable is it? What would happen when the projects ended?”

Another spiritual leader was concerned that,

“People come from the outside and do not spend time to get to know the community and the area. They see what is on the surface and they only see problems--ups and downs in life are part of development and part of life. World society is changing; way of life is changing, that is normal. All is OK.” He said that everyone needs to work together for development in a more coordinated way, providing an example: “If there is a car broken down and you tie many horses all around it and start pulling, the car will not go very far as the horses are pulling in different directions, but if the horses were all tied to the front and pulled together the car would move much faster.”

Reflection of the Listening Team

The Listening Team reflected on the common opinion that in comparison with government initiated development programs, international and local development organizations have done a better job at involving community members in participatory processes from the beginning of the programs. In the case of international agencies that seemed to have successfully engaged communities, they questioned then what their role was or should be in advocating for increased community participation in joint interventions with government officials? Also, with a number of development interventions in this area funded by bilateral donors through the Government, what are the opportunities for bringing these experiences and voices from the community to be heard and considered?

The reports of poor follow-up and monitoring by both government and international organizations were certainly of concern to the Listening Teams. The Team members discussed one of the reasons for this being that there is not enough staff capacity. The monitoring systems are in place but the process remains problematic due to frequent staff changes and lack of continuity in established relationships with community leaders. The communities are also expected and often asked to be involved in monitoring themselves, but they are often reluctant to bring up problems and issues with the NGOs or the Government departments. The team suggested that for all NGO-funded programs, the village committees should be trained and required to monitor project outcomes, and that NGO staff should be available and required to follow-up and do “spot checks.”

3. Beneficiary Selection Process

The Government lending schemes are open to groups that are already organized and operating, and people who are not part of an organized group are not able to access funds. People raised
concerns that group borrowing and joint liability create peer pressure, loss of trust, and the likelihood that the poorest will remain excluded. Some people felt that the people with influence and power in the village decided who benefits. As one woman said, “Information about decisions on allocation of funds was not shared with all members; it was not clear what criteria were used to select beneficiaries.”

Another woman acknowledged that “Some credit groups choose not to open up membership because they are afraid of defaulters. We are happy with our number - it is just manageable. We have had to say ‘no’ to many people.”

Another woman who did not receive a loan complained that “Community leaders only choose their friends and people they love.”

In contrast, a woman whose children received scholarships said that the village committee chooses the poorest families: “It has been very helpful to me and my family; otherwise we would be in even more debt. We would still educate our children but we would probably have to borrow even more money. I would not be sitting here. I would be away working.”

Some people said that NGOs supported the poor people whereas the Government departments assisted those who were well connected, relying on the patronage system. As one school teacher said, “NGOs shared success with the communities, but the Government officials claim the credit of work done by the community members.”

**Reflection of the Listening Team**
The listening team members noted that often agencies do provide a clear framework which outlines targeting and selection procedures, but that community leaders make decisions in a non-participatory way and that people often disagree with their decisions. What is the role then of the international assistance agencies to ensure a fair and transparent selection process? The dilemma of exerting more control and oversight versus letting the communities decide for themselves is a recurring theme which deserves more exploration and analysis.

At the start of the analysis and reflection discussions, communication was near the bottom of the list of concerns prioritized by the team members, but at the end of the discussion many felt that improvements in communication should be given high priority by aid agencies, as well as the Government led programs. The Listening Team members acknowledged that it is not easy to work in a community. Communities are not always homogeneous and/or harmonious, and it is important to take the time to know and understand the community, and to communicate well to the whole community to avoid misunderstanding.

**Report on the Listening Conversations Held in Bangkok**
The three facilitators of the listening exercise held several conversations with people in Bangkok in order to hear opinions and perspectives of people who have observed, funded and/or
implemented international assistance efforts across Thailand. Over half of them were Thai nationals involved in international assistance efforts.

WHAT WE HEARD

Local Capacity for Development

Most of the people we spoke to in Bangkok noted that Thai people have the capacity to develop, guide and direct their own development. One person stated that, “a lot of PhDs bump into each other,” alluding to the fact that Thai people have the expertise and skills to lead the country’s development themselves. One person noted that at this stage of development in Thailand, “we don’t need a boss but we need friends.”

“International NGOs should not work at the community level. They should work through local partners and build capacity of local civil society and development groups in this way. The role of the ‘donor’ does not have to be a detached funding role. It can be a partnership...Unfortunately, international NGOs don’t build capacity of national NGOs. Even when they work through local partners, the local NGOs simply become a 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.”

President of a prominent national NGO

Several people noted that there is enough local capacity for development in Thailand, including not only technical expertise but also available financial resources. There are millionaires and tycoons in Thailand who have resources to invest in the country. Some of these people have begun to make investments in communities, especially in education, but there is a sense that people “don’t know how to donate.” They do not know how to make effective and appropriate investments in developing people and communities.

Role of Donors

Some people noted that there is a need to have adaptability in all development efforts. Yet, the conditions currently set by some donors are resulting in greater costs to the Thai people. For example, when a donor insists on specific equipment being purchased or vendors hired, this may result in a net loss to the Thai people when goods are purchased abroad instead of locally, and when outside technical experts leave no capacity behind.

Another concern that was raised was that, “some international NGOs come with their own agendas and are driven and influenced by the priorities set by their donors.”

While improvements have been made, there are still many donors who bring their projects without discussing them with or gathering input from Thai people. In these circumstances, Thai
people do not have much, if any, input into the framework for assistance, and as a result, the impact of development efforts may be inappropriate or even detrimental.

People also noted that it is difficult to establish a mandate, agenda and relationships when working with multilateral donors and that collaboration with bilateral donors may be more successful. Overall, they noted that there is a need to develop and facilitate stakeholder alliances in which long-term collaborative relationships are formed, leading to a deeper understanding and commitment to shared goals for development in the country.

**Context of Future Development**

Some people felt that international development agencies have changed their approach and have become friendlier and more conscientious in their work. Many Bangkok comments echoed what we heard in the communities about the distinction between development work performed by international NGOs and that managed by Government officials. NGOs are perceived to be working more with communities and attempting to solicit community participation, while the Government is seen to be spending time emphasizing guidelines, mechanisms and details.

People discussed the need to understand the local context, listen to what people need, and approach development efforts in partnership with local organizations and individuals. They noted that these participatory efforts are difficult to quantify and since donors place more value on quantifiable results, they may be difficult to justify as expenditures. Participatory approaches have a longer planning and preparation time and require time spent building and developing collegial relationship.

People noted that sometimes there is a need to “decorate the results” to get donor commitments, and that future development efforts need to evaluate the full impact before being initiated. As one person in a donor agency noted,

“What we initiate [or] offer should not jeopardize other things. And these efforts must incorporate community participation at all levels. However, it is important to consider that what works in one village may not work for neighboring villages...It is not always easy to work with the community, not everyone in the community wants to take part.”

There are new, emerging patterns in development assistance in Thailand, but people noted that efforts are still “susceptible to the same old system.” Part of this may in fact be a result of Thai culture, in which existing systems and methods of working are difficult to change. As one person noted,

“Patriotism is not always bad but we need community champions to advance development efforts successfully. These community champions or advocates can sometimes access resources that communities cannot always secure themselves.”

Some people also discussed the need to measure development from a perspective of happiness rather than focusing solely on economic indicators. One person noted that,

“Donors have one language, communities have another language... We need ‘bilingual’ people who can communicate with both.”
Several people emphasized that Thai people have the capacity to develop and implement their own development efforts and that they “want sustainability, self-reliance.” As one person noted, “As the king says, we need a ‘sufficiency economy’ and that being a “Donor recipient [is] not acceptable anymore.”

The president of a national NGO pointed out the missing links in international assistance, saying, “The problem is that legal, political and human rights issues at the macro, or national level get very little attention. Foreign donors are more interested in providing humanitarian aid and supporting small community development projects, but this project-based assistance does not address the structural issues. Only human rights groups are still working on these issues.”

One official noted that there is a need to target policy-makers and politicians to bring about legal changes to ensure that all residents of Thailand have access to resources and human rights. For instance, migrant workers in tsunami-affected areas received relief benefits but not recovery benefits since they are not legal residents. As one person said, there are still, “significant human trafficking issues, but also quasi-legal issues.” Few advocate for the people who are not legal residents of Thailand and not enough is being done on a policy level for them.

### People’s Reactions to the Listening Project

People were generous with their time and very patient with the Listening Teams, considering that many of them have talked to other “note-taking visitors” multiple times before. People were open and friendly towards the Listening Teams and invited the Teams to return for more conversations. A Buddhist monk felt it was most important for NGOs to share and learn from lessons about disaster recovery. He thought that the Listening Project is a brilliant idea and that more NGOs should do this.

Fishermen who are part of a local guild told us that, “The NGOs would never be able to read our minds. Even Thai NGOs are hard to contact much less foreign people who just arrived. Thank you for taking our message to them.”

In a few conversations, Listening Teams seemed to have alarmed people by asking to give suggestions for improvement for “next time,” which was met by a frightened question, “so there will be another tsunami?”

Several people asked us to share what other people are discussing with us in nearby villages. Upon hearing a brief summary of previous conversations, people had a range of responses: surprise, agreement, disagreements and an interest to hear more. Several Listening Teams received invitations to return for another conversation and a visit, and we hope those who continue to work in Thai communities will take them up on this offer to listen and learn even more from their experiences.