



# Editorial: Reflecting, listening, and doing better

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Each year I teach a module on ‘international development’ (with a particular focus on WASH) to a postgraduate class drawn from many countries. We discuss both the ideas and concepts which underlie development and disaster risk reduction, and also some of the practicalities and realities of these challenging endeavours. Teaching and being questioned by bright and enquiring individuals who come from a wide range of professional and cultural experiences presents a welcome opportunity to reflect again on what this work is all about.

## Questioning

What is development? What is it for, and who should decide? How does international aid impact on the development efforts of national governments, civil society organizations, and other actors? To what extent do global goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the strategies of governments, donors, and INGOs match the needs and aspirations of the public in ‘developing’ countries? What right do outsiders have to impose their values and priorities on so-called ‘beneficiaries’? What obligations does the international community have to counter injustice and inequality?

These and many other questions come up regularly, and each of us who is involved in development or humanitarian work should regularly reflect on our own stance.

We each have our own cultural and individual values which determine our attitudes and behaviours. We have widely differing views on politics, rights, responsibilities, and our own place in the global picture of development, aid, and relief. But are there some basics on which we can all agree?

## Agreeing what’s needed

A number of statements, principles, and charters have won broad agreement in recent decades. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDGs form a summary of global ambitions across many sectors and aspects of development. In the words of Ban Ki-moon, former UN Secretary-General, ‘The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals are our shared vision of humanity and a social contract between the world’s leaders and the people. They are a to-do list for people and planet, and a blueprint for success.’ All initiatives have their critics, but it is encouraging to see the world largely lining up behind this ambitious ‘to-do list’.

The Paris Principles and subsequent statements urging donors and other development partners to align behind national government leadership of domestic development policies and strategies have also been widely welcomed – even if the

difficulties of working with weak governments and in so-called fragile states are equally well-recognized.

In our own sectors, the human rights declarations around water and sanitation, the WASH Sustainability Charter and the WASH Agenda For Change have received wide recognition and support – not least because of the highly participatory ways in which they were developed.

A few of the common principles underlying these agreements include:

- the inherent value and dignity of each person;
- the right of nation states to determine their own development pathways;
- the obligations of nation states to ensure basic human rights;
- international responsibilities to relieve suffering and ‘leave no-one behind’;
- the unacceptability of some extremities of poverty, disadvantage, and suffering;
- the importance of systemic change – tackling root causes and not simply symptoms.

## Listening

A constant challenge in development practice is for those of us involved in objective-setting, strategy development, and programming to hear – really hear – what those whom we variously call rights holders, service users, or ‘beneficiaries’ really want and need. It is common in international conferences for someone to stand up and say ‘... but where are the poor, the disadvantaged, those whom we’re trying to assist, in this meeting of ours?’ And of course they are usually absent.

Too little of the literature reports either first-hand or even indirectly what people on the receiving end of development and aid (two different but related things) aspire to or really need. There are exceptions. *Time to Listen*, published six years ago, makes sobering reading for anyone involved in development, relief, and international cooperation. The book reports on the experiences of 6,000 people on the receiving end of international assistance – and it provides an insightful critique. It is a call not to end such assistance, but to listen to ‘people on the receiving end ...’ and to do better.

## Doing better

We are generally well-aware of the strictures and disadvantages imposed by aspects of poverty, gender, identity, age, illness, and disability. This journal has a proud track record in raising awareness of the needs of disadvantaged groups and minorities. But in pursuing globally agreed goals and applying principles and practices which are widely accepted in development in general and in WASH specifically, I believe we need to do much better when it comes to listening to and heeding the wishes and hopes of those whose lives we touch. All the current news and dialogue about ‘accountability’ boils down to this: every one of us working in development and relief, in our own countries or abroad, must ultimately be accountable to those we affect.

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## Bibliography

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