

Editorial: Statistics matter, but people matter more

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If you work – or intend to work - for a Government, a non-governmental organization (NGO), a development partner or a social enterprise in a low- or middle-income country then you probably have some familiarity with the communities which you are trying to help. Make no mistake though, if you are reading this journal you are almost certainly an outsider to those communities. Your origins, your education, or your relative wealth, among other things, set you apart from those whose poverty you are working to alleviate. You can never truly and fully share the experiences of those who live there.

What you can do however is to try to *imagine* the lived experience of people (and especially poor people) in such settings. In your mind's eye you can feel the climate, see the living conditions, and get some insight into the ups and downs of life in the slum, the village, the small town, or the refugee camp which you are imagining. You can do so because you have informed yourself in various ways about life there. You have taken the first steps in understanding people's lives.

In all development sectors, and in humanitarian response, there is a dominance of numbers, percentages and aggregated targets. Water and sanitation access is described in such terms, as of course are costs and budgets. Even the benefits of water and sanitation services are monetised by economists to enable benefit/cost ratios to be calculated. Such ratios may persuade Ministers of Finance, but I suspect they cut little ice with those who enjoy (or do not yet enjoy) such services. The exercise of imagination is an important step away from statistics towards the experiences of real people.

Those who are classed by others (or who would describe themselves) as 'poor' have many reasons for celebrations and enjoyment of the blessings of life; human and social 'capital' exists in even the poorest communities. However, those more negative aspects which define poverty are the things which development and humanitarian professionals rightly focus on, and they are not simple and singular. A community which struggles with water and sanitation access may also experience regular food insecurity; furthermore the combination of these with inadequate shelter and exposure to increasingly frequent natural disasters, including those exacerbated by climate change, renders people increasingly vulnerable. The circles of those lacking basic water and sanitation services, those living with chronic hunger, poor health and inadequate housing, are overlapping. Poverty is indeed multi-dimensional.

Those deprivations and insecurities which preoccupy people vary over time. A leaky roof is less important in the long dry season than in the rains; the availability of sufficient food takes on increasing importance as the hungry season approaches; households may be less interested in the quality of their drinking water at normal times, but when cholera threatens its salience may be stimulated; sanitation may take on greater importance as population densities increase and safe places to defecate are more scarce.

There is much emphasis in development and humanitarian response on 'delivery' – spending, doing, achieving tangible results, and demonstrating impact. According to the findings of the seminal 'Time to Listen' report (Anderson et al, 2012), this can lead to (a) a focus on what is missing, and so needs to be supplied; (b) programmes being shaped and designed even before talking to the recipients; (c) a focus on growth – more is better - and spending; and (d) a focus on speed. All of this adds up to a tendency for external interventions to be mismatched to what makes sense to and is consistent with the needs of communities. *Listening* to communities (a difficult art nowadays) takes one on the second step beyond imagination and into something closer to understanding the realities of people's lived experiences.

If development and humanitarian response are to be done well, then I suggest a couple of simple 'rules of engagement'. First, identify, check and double-check all your assumptions: imagine, observe, listen and be ready to change; remember, it's far easier to be wrong about what's needed than to be right. Second, where there are differences between what you think is best for people and what those people say they want, figure out exactly why; poor people act rationally; if the way they act doesn't make sense, the onus is on you to understand their rationality and find ways of connecting with it.

Finally, the one word that I have avoided using thus far in this editorial is 'empathy'. The Iranian-American author and professor Azar Nafisi (2005) has made the link between imagination and empathy well: 'Only curiosity about the fate of others, the ability to put ourselves in their shoes, and the will to enter their world through the magic of imagination, creates this shock of recognition. Without this empathy there can be no genuine dialogue, and we as individuals and nations will remain isolated and alien, segregated and fragmented.' As local communities, nations and international players strive to fulfill the hugely ambitious and fundamentally linked SDGs, empathy on the part of development and humanitarian professionals and dialogue with recipients of assistance will be needed more and more.

References

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