The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks

“Closing the Loop: On-going research into effective feedback practices”

Isabella Jean, Director of Evaluation and Learning at CDA Collaborative Learning

Part 1: Overview

About the Speaker: Isabella Jean is the Director of Evaluation and Learning at CDA Collaborative Learning based in Cambridge, MA. She supports the development of effective methods for capturing the results of CDA’s efforts to influence the practice and policies of corporate operations, peacebuilding, development and humanitarian aid. She has led field-based collaborative learning and research efforts with international and local aid agencies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Based on findings from CDA’s Listening Project, Isabella Jean co-authored a book on cumulative impacts of international assistance “Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid.” Isabella’s research and analysis focuses on aid effectiveness, conflict-sensitive aid and peacebuilding effectiveness, participatory program design, monitoring and evaluation methods, and feedback loops.

Isabella also serves as an Adjunct Faculty at Brandeis University’s Heller School for Social Policy Management where she teaches a graduate course on design, monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding interventions.

The findings and the guidance points Isabella Jean shared come from a joint research conducted by Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance and Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), and Isabella’s organization, CDA Collaborative Learning. (Please refer to the recording to see the slides)

Presenter Remarks:

CDA and ALNAP have been working together through CDA’s Listening Program in order to empower local voices on issues surrounding assistance coming to their communities. The partnership seeks to gather evidence on the use and effectiveness in feedback systems across a variety of contexts and programs. There are a range of rationales and aspirations for feedback loops, including: commitments to strengthening accountability, improving programs, participatory processes, and a better understanding of the changes in the context. The case-studies CDA have conducted highlight a number of factors relating to situational, operational, and organizational cultural aspects which influence the functioning of feedback loops and their effectiveness.
CDA conducted 3 case studies with operational aid agencies responding to humanitarian needs:

- In Darfur, with World Vision’s Food Assistance Programs in the IDP camps.
- In Pakistan, with International Organization for Migration (IOM) in flood-affected areas.
- In Haiti, with the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) dealing with Earthquake Response and Relocation.

There was no definition for feedback loops across sectors, so CDA wrote one. A feedback mechanism is seen as effective if, at minimum, it supports the collection, acknowledgement, analysis, and response to the feedback received, thus forming a closed feedback loop. When the feedback loop is left open, the mechanism is not fully effective. There’s a critical distinction here: a feedback mechanism is not merely the channel by which you gather feedback, a fully-functioning, effective mechanism should have all the elements described above.

CDA-ALNAP asked for experiences and opinions from a range of users:

- People among the affected population who are receiving humanitarian assistance.
- Observers.
- People within the agency at different levels.

CDA-ALNAP looked very closely at feedback utilization in decision making. A number of factors enable utilization. CDA-ALNAP produced an evidence-based guidance (offered in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic) has a total of fifteen points, and Isabella discussed those that are more relevant to peacebuilding.

**Is a Formal or Informal Mechanism Better?**

Organizations often use a variety of channels, not all of which are explicitly set up as formal feedback mechanisms. There are relative advantages and disadvantages to both formal and informal feedback systems.

Some advantages to a formal system are:

- Dedicated budgets allocated for feedback mechanisms.
- Capacity development so that the mechanisms can function well.
- Institutional continuity and consistency even when staff change positions.

Some advantages to an informal system are:

- Responsiveness to changes in the context.
- Relationship-building so affected peoples and partners trust the process.

CDA-ALNAP found that it is important to be intentional about the decision to employ formal or informal feedback mechanisms.
Context Matters

For peacebuilding practitioners, context matters. The research found that both aid recipients and aid agency staff talked about the importance of context-appropriate design for feedback channels. Beyond cultural considerations, it is important to consider dynamics that arise in special environments, for example the protracted displacement of people living in the camps in Darfur call for certain types of feedback channels, which would not work in urban settings like in Port-au-Prince, or for the dispersed rural populations in Pakistan.

Power dynamics and power analysis are also important considerations. Power and influence, peacebuilding organizations’ and that of others, impact how feedback channels are perceived and how they’re used. For peacekeeping practitioners it’s important to remember that providing feedback in authoritarian and insecure environments can come at a considerable risk, and it’s important to ensure that benefits of providing feedback outweigh the cost and the risk to users.

If you decide that a formal mechanism is needed, a consultative process needs to include not just people in your program and its participants, but also people inside your agency. Several important steps in the design process include:

1. Consult those who are expected to use feedback mechanism within your agency as to how the collected data will be used.
2. Do a broader situational analysis which also includes informational needs – what do affected people need to hear from you to develop trust and to support informed and relevant feedback process?
3. Contemplate which resources are needed to run an effective mechanism. Isabella and CDA have observed that effective mechanisms in organizations are the ones that plan out and allocate resources for all elements: feedback collection, data entry, sorting, verification, and analysis.
4. Response is critical in order to gain program participants’ trust and ensuring that the users of the feedback channel continue to use it.

Response does not lie on the shoulders of the frontline staff alone; maintenance of the vitality of feedback mechanisms is also a responsibility of senior managers, program managers, and donors, because some much-needed action may require significant changes to larger programming. Frontline staffs are not often empowered to lead on such significant course corrections and need the feedback loop to extend to the headquarters or beyond.
Isabella stressed the link between response and flexibility. How much space do you actually have to maneuver in the way that a program and strategy is directed? What has to be negotiated internally for decisions to be made based on this evidence? The guidance stresses that setting up channels and asking for feedback while knowing that there is absolutely no flexibility to modify programs goes against the purpose of establishing an effective feedback mechanism. Flexibility must also come from the donor’s side by allowing flexible funding and timeframes to allow for some significant course corrections.

In order to support utilization, demand for feedback needs to be created and supported internally. Frontline staff, who are burdened with all kinds of other monitoring tasks, may have a hard time prioritizing feedback. They need to see the demand coming from inside their agencies. Staff also indicated that it’s critical to share feedback at relevant points in the program cycle. There are many bottlenecks along the flow of information, and knowing where to place a feedback mechanism to be most successful is critical.

Unsolicited Feedback

For peacebuilding practitioners, unsolicited feedback is a particularly important piece, because it relates to the use of feedback channels for context monitoring and not just program monitoring. A lot of organizations struggle with this question what do we do with the information if it doesn’t relate to a specific program or our area of intervention. CDA looks at unsolicited feedback as big-picture feedback. Some of it touches on issues that go beyond the scope of your work, but it may also challenge the very premise of your program. It may call for significant program redesign, not just a small tweak. If acted upon, day-to-day feedback can bring about project-level adjustments, but this big-picture feedback often is left untouched. Staff are not trained enough as to what to do with it.

The cases where CDA-ALNAP observed unsolicited feedback being utilized well was where feedback was aggregated and shared at the country level within coordination bodies for advocacy purposes. It is possible to use unsolicited feedback, but it requires a very intentional approach and preparation for staff to be able to manage it.

Part 2: Question & Answer

Melanie Kawano-Chiu: You had mentioned that there was a best process to deal with unsolicited feedback. Do you have any examples?

Isabella Jean: It’s a challenging area for a lot of staff who find themselves on the ground in communities and are approached with challenges to the foundations of the programs being implemented. When feedback comes unsolicited, it often goes undocumented. Frontline staffs aren’t often trained to manage unsolicited feedback, but these are important skills that should be a part of the feedback process.

We have seen cases where it was managed well. In Pakistan, in northern Sindh, there was pressure from the many sides to escalate information. They passed on the information to the
right people, and the unsolicited feedback was collected at an aggregate level. This was done often in a very informal way by using their mobile numbers and not waiting for an issue to escalate before giving feedback. This requires a good information sharing system as well as the knowledge of who the important people are who need to hear and can respond to unsolicited feedback information.

**Nele Blommestein (attendee):** How does feedback ideally relate to the broader data collected throughout the organization, including monitoring and dissemination processes?

**Isabella:** There are monitoring teams that process a lot of data on a daily basis. I’ve also spoken to senior management teams that request different forms of data, which can be considered an evidence bundle. This includes monitoring, and sometimes market analysis, and all sorts of things that program teams might request. Feedback is one such source, but often as a trigger point but not as the exclusive reason for programmatic change. I don’t think feedback stands alone, and yet when it comes to feedback around something like corruption and staff misconduct, you don’t need to survey 25 people in order to act. Most programs have a very clear triage system – there’s feedback and also complaints. Complaints are of a different nature, and some are extremely sensitive. When it is sensitive, there’s a very clear procedure. It escalates incredibly quickly, and within 48 hours, investigation and verification mission is on its way to look into the issue. Whereas feedback needs a little bit of a fermentation period for organizations to recognize that there’s something to work with.

**Steven Lichty (attendee, The Frontline Group):** Have you found any particular tool useful with helping clients or organizations better understand and analyze the power dynamics at play in regard to the utilization of feedback mechanisms?

**Isabella:** I can’t think of a specific tool beyond what’s been used for years in participatory development. I think the organizations that recognize the power dynamics in communities and really are able to talk about it do so in consistent and very informal ways. Social hierarchies are pivotal to understanding people and community dynamics. I think a simple community-mapping exercise can be very helpful; What’s more important is recognizing the influence of your own power and the effect that power’s presence has in the setting.

**Ruth McLean Dawson (attendee):** How do you handle feedback to communities, especially when you are not necessarily prioritizing a concern?

**Judith Russell (attendee):** Is there is a difference between communicating data and feedback, and analyzing and reflecting on that data? Do you have any experiences with ways of incorporating a layered reflection process of the data that is relevant to affected communities, implementation agencies, and donors? Also, in a lot of these contexts there are multiple implementation agencies and donors. Have you come across any mechanisms that are relevant for one context with multiple organizations?

**Isabella:** Yes, it is very different communicating and collecting data internally vs analyzing and reflecting. We have seen some interesting examples where teams truly made a distinction that something is really time-sensitive and urgent, we have to act on it within 48-72 hours because it’s our organizations’ reputation, and needs to be dealt with. It’s important to note if
some piece or group of feedback cannot effect a current program, but could inform the thinking on the next phase of a project. Really making sense of the data and knowing what it means for now and what it could be used for down the line is important. That’s the story to be tracked – will it be used in the next response?

We’ve heard of joint feedback mechanisms – they have been set up, but didn’t last very long in the contexts we visited. By the time we were on the ground, we were not able to view any joint feedback mechanisms, except for the example given earlier from Pakistan. It wasn’t formal at all, though, mostly people using their mobile phones. It wasn’t documented, stored, and analyzed as some of the other data was. Joint feedback systems are definitely an aspiration for many organizations, but there is still some experimentation to be done. Whenever you implement a system, you have to be comfortable airing out your dirty laundry and sharing data, which not every organization is comfortable with.

If you have any follow-up questions, please post them on the Thursday Talk Discussion Forum here.