Waiting to be Heard

Preliminary Results of the 2012 Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings

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Szeged Group of Protect the Future - Hungary
Energy Environment and Development Society (EEDS) - India
Rural Women's Association (ALGA) - Kyrgyzstan

Sustainable Rural Community Development Organisation (SURCOD) - Malawi
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Human Sciences Research Council – South Africa
Women's Academic Solidarity Association – South Africa
Masimanyane Women's Support Centre – South Africa
and numerous individual volunteers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"*Ask us what we want.*"

Forty-five years later[1], this simple request is still rarely met. Understanding what people need and want is the most basic prerequisite to intelligent collaborations, interventions, and assistance. It is relatively easy to discover. Yet so often this step is skipped, as governments impose their agendas, international agencies carry out their mandates, businesses look for profitable relationships, and NGOs rush in to help. The *Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings* project was designed to rectify this omission by taking one simple step: asking people what they want.

Why this Field Hearings project?
Initiative for Equality (IfE), a global network of advocates for social, economic and political equality among the world's peoples, undertook the *Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings* project motivated by a deep desire to see a transformation of the world's societies and relationships in the direction of meaningful equity and deep equality. We believe that strategies to achieve this vision must be based on an understanding of what currently disempowered communities need, want and think—which can only be ascertained by asking.

Our goals included: (1) effectively channeling the voices of disempowered communities into the Rio+20 and Sustainable Development Goals dialogues and other multilateral processes; (2) learning what people in currently disempowered communities are thinking, so that we can develop effective, collaborative, grassroots strategies for moving towards greater equity and equality; (3) gathering input from these communities to help direct the writing of a global civil society *Equity & Sustainability Treaty* and a *Post-Rio Action Plan for Equity*; and (4) developing long-term working relationships with others who share some of these same goals.

> "*...participants of Hearings were really glad to know that their voices would be presented at Rio+20 and Millennium Development Goals dialogues. The idea that their opinions will be listened to at international events inspired them very much.*" (Kyrgyzstan)

Our long-term vision for the *Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings* is to build a well-organized and sustained global network of partners, reaching broadly across civil society and deeply into grassroots communities, as part of an unstoppable people's movement for equity and equality.

Project organization and governance
The *Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings* Project (hereinafter called the "Project") was coordinated by *Initiative for Equality* (IfE) and ultimately conducted by 18 Field Hearing Partners ("Partners") in 34 communities. The Project was launched in January of 2012, with a global call for partners. Initially, more volunteer Partners were identified, but by the time of this writing, only the 18 Partners were able to complete the Field Hearings, while others dropped out because of lack of resources. Initially, IfE's *Equity & Sustainability Steering Committee*[2] provided direction and decision-making for the Project, developing the preliminary questionnaires and reaching out to organizations and individuals whom they knew might be interested in collaborating. Once the Partners were identified and the Project was underway,

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[1] Hand-drawn sign help up by Aboriginal Australian men on strike for better conditions in 1968 (photo in report)
[2] Deborah Rogers, Anthony Akpan, Zhiyuan Song, Nazmul Huq, Lizzy Mabotja, Uchita de Zoysa, Marilyn Cornelius

individuals from the partnering groups came onto the Steering Committee to finalize the questionnaire and make needed decisions for the Project. Deborah S. Rogers was the coordinator of the project, editor of this full report, and author of this Executive Summary.

Field Hearing Partners and communities surveyed
Field Hearing Partners in 2012 included research groups in university programs (Bangladesh, China, Hungary, Nigeria, Philippines, Uganda) and government programs (South Africa), as well as organized civil society groups (Bangladesh, India, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Mauritius, and Nigeria). In three cases (China, Hungary and South Africa), researcher groups collaborated with civil society groups. Some partners had as many as 20 people working together to conduct the interviews and discussions, while others had only one or two people to gather the information. A total of 34 communities were surveyed through paper or on-line questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, or open public meetings. These communities were distributed as follows:

Methodology
The method of the Project was to ask questions and gather direct input from a broad range of communities in different parts of the world, to better understand both the common and differing circumstances that people are experiencing today, and their perceptions about these experiences. It is important to recognize that this was not a scientific, statistically valid survey undertaken for reasons of academic research, but was instead a form of outreach to solicit input from individuals and communities in order to accomplish the goals outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

To accomplish these goals, a questionnaire was developed by the Steering Committee with input and revisions from the Partners. Individual Partners were then given the task of ensuring that the questionnaire was both linguistically and culturally appropriate for their own communities. In other words, they were asked to translate it into the local language(s), as well as to make any necessary modifications to make sure that it made sense to the people who were interviewed, in the context of their lives and circumstances.

The Basic Questionnaire (developed jointly in English) included questions on the following matters.

Assess Trends:
are things getting better, worse, or staying the same in a number of important dimensions of life, including health, education, economy, political, conflict, families, circumstances for women, and happiness?

Speculate About Causes:
to what do you attribute these trends?

Changes Needed for Sustainable Societies:
what is needed in order to develop a good life for your family and community, that can last in the future?

Perceptions of Privilege and Deprivation:
how are privilege and deprivation experienced in your community? in which group do you consider yourself?

Articulate Wishes for the Future:
what do you want for the future of your family and community?

Partners were also given wide latitude in how to conduct the Field Hearings. Methods ranged from on-line questionnaires to one-one-one interviews, and from focus group discussions to open public meetings. Each partner chose a method that they felt would work best in their community. Some Partners used different methods in different communities, depending on the nature of the community. Each individual Field Hearings Report (Chapters 3 - 15) describes the approach taken by that group of Partners.

Conducting the Field Hearings

Many of the Field Hearings Partners were themselves strongly affected by the process of conducting these Field Hearings. In emails and teleconferences, they talked about their feelings of responsibility to the communities in which they conducted discussions. Several expressed the concern that it was not ethical to show up, raise the discussion of profoundly important problems, and then just disappear. By talking about these things, we are raising hopes that we will help them do something about it, they said.

Several Partners were surprised, but pleased, by how eager participants were to share their views and feelings. One project coordinator told us, "once they started talking, we couldn't get them to stop!" Another said, "this was literally the first time someone had asked these people what they think."

In some cases, Partners themselves were forced to rethink assumptions and open themselves to new understandings. Information passed both ways during these interviews and discussions, and required much creative thinking in the moment.

Summary of Results

Assessing Trends

In every Field Hearing, participants were asked to talk about what was getting better, getting worse, or staying the same in their community. They were prompted by a list of areas for discussion (see Basic Questionnaire in Annex B). They were also asked to compare the lives of children and young people today with the lives of people who are now in their 50's or older.

What is getting better?

In many of the communities, people reported that the position of women is better now than in the past. Women are more likely to be able to own property and get an education now. This was sometimes attributed to the promotion of women's rights by organized civil society. However, significant problems still remain, especially in relationships between men and women; thus women's rights shows up in the column of problems as well.

A number of communities reported improvements in the area of health care, education, and technology access. As with women's status, there also remain problems in these areas. Some communities reported an improved political situation in their country; others reported the opposite, so this is not a trend but instead a specific local historical circumstance.

What is still bad or getting worse?

The list of worsening problems is very long indeed, but there are some common themes that emerged from almost all of the communities.

* **Environmental degradation**: almost every community mentioned this as a serious concern. Specific problems ranged from water contamination (industrial, agricultural or from sewage) through

deforestation or declining soil fertility to impacts of climate change (changing rainfall patterns, desertification or flooding).

* **Corruption**: most of the communities condemned government officials for high and increasing levels of corruption, and blamed this for many of the economic problems experienced by lower-income citizens.

* **Inequality**: most communities said that levels of socioeconomic inequality are growing, even if improvements have been made in helping the poor or the overall economy. Many expressed concern that growing inequality wipes out the gains made in economic development. Women in many communities reported that they still have problems with access to decision-making within the family, economy and politics. **See section on inequality, below.**

* **Economic security**: almost every community worried about the growing lack of economic security. Jobs are difficult to find and may not last. Economic opportunities are scarce and generally available only to those with connections. Young people do not feel hopeful.

* **Social problems**: a substantial proportion of the communities mentioned that they are experiencing growing social problems, covering a diversity of issues such as breakdown of traditional social structures, lack of respect by youth for their elders, inappropriate sexual behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, loss of family and leisure time, or lack of community solidarity and unity in tackling problems.

* **Conflict**: many communities reported that conflicts between ethnic groups or political factions are growing more frequent. Some attributed this to competition for increasingly scarce land or resources.

* **Intangibles: happiness and hope**
It is difficult to interpret the meaning of responses on trends in happiness and hopefulness. Although these qualities are extremely important to the functioning of a community, their presence or absence reflects a complexity of current circumstances interpreted in the light of past history and anticipated future.

Speculating About Causes

In every Field Hearing, participants were asked to speculate about the underlying causes of the various problems they are experiencing. They were not prompted in any way; this was an open-ended question. While many explanations were offered, of course, there were certain themes that turned up repeatedly. It was often difficult to know whether a particular concern constituted a "problem" or a "cause." In reality, the various problems and causes are probably related in a vicious cycle. Explanations cited included:

* Corruption, cronyism, nepotism, lack of accountability and transparency, and impunity on the part of government officials: this cluster of concerns was a strong complaint in most (but not all) communities. It is viewed as being a major driver of lack of economic opportunities for lower income people, and one of the primary mechanisms by which inequality is perpetuated and increased.

* Social and economic inequality, unequal treatment of women, prejudice and discrimination, and greed and selfishness on the part of those with money and power: one or more aspects from this cluster of concerns was frequently offered as an explanation for lack of economic opportunities by the poor and by women. It is related to—but not the same as—the "corruption" cluster, above.

* Environmental degradation, competition for scarce resources, growing populations, changing weather: this environmental cluster of concerns was cited by quite a few of the communities as an explanation for difficulties in the agricultural sector, for conflict between people, or for health problems related to poor environmental quality.

* Lack of appropriate training, education, knowledge resources, or planning: this "intellectual resources" cluster was frequently proposed as an underlying reason for failures by governments and communities to manage environmental and sustainability challenges properly.

* Lack of sufficient unity among community members: people in a number of the communities felt that the group solidarity and unity of purpose needed to tackle and solve difficult problems was lacking. Several attributed this to divisions created or aggravated by growing levels of inequality.

Changes Needed for Sustainable Societies

Field Hearing participants were asked to identify the changes they thought were needed in order to move their community towards sustainability. Respondents were prompted with a list of potential areas to be addressed (see Basic Questionnaire in Annex B). Many communities answered "all of the above," not because they were not interested, but because after lengthy discussion, they agreed with the necessity of all the items on the list. For communities which emphasized particular solutions, the emphasis was generally on fixing the items they had identified as "Causes" (see above).

Given the above, common themes were identified as follows:

* Governance: end corruption and commit to good governance in all regards

* Better planning: urban planning, resource management

* Meeting basic needs: food, health care, education and training, knowledge resources

* Economic opportunities: redirect resources to create economic opportunities for all, rather than accumulation of wealth for the few

* Social: better relationships between men and women, between community members, and between groups in society will allow people to work together to solve problems

* Access: the poor, women, and marginalized groups want to have social and political access to participate in developing and implementing solutions for society

Perceptions of Privilege and Deprivation

A series of 10 question was asked related to social, economic and political inequality. People were asked to discuss the privileged and deprived groups in their community, whether the gap between rich and poor was growing or shrinking, whether these differences created problems, and if so, what should be done. The specific form and wording of these sensitive questions was developed by Partner groups along with the Project Steering Committee, and each Partner was asked to modify the questions as needed to ensure that they were culturally appropriate and understandable in their communities.

There were certain common responses that we heard in most of the communities:

* The gap between wealthy and poor is perceived as increasing greatly almost everywhere.

* Wealth and poverty are seen as directly associated with access to political decision-making and to economic opportunities; thus the disparities in these are also increasing greatly.

* The rich and politically-connected are blamed for this problem; no one blamed the poor themselves for the situation. Several groups cited racial or ethnic discrimination as a root cause, while others blamed the greed and selfishness of the rich or cited the entanglement of political power and business opportunity.

* Although progress has been made in some places, the perceived disempowerment of women in most (but not all) communities continues. It plays out in families, in business, in politics, and in lack of personal safety. It is, perhaps, mentioned more now than it was in the past, due to global efforts to build awareness and promote women's rights. Many women expressed very strong feelings about the situation.

Articulating Wishes for the Future

Participants were asked, "In the future, if your family and community had the resources, what would you do to create a better situation?" They were prompted to consider 12 areas, from children, women, and men through education and environment.

The wishes articulated by most members of these communities were simple and basic. They want stable income and a secure future. They want food, health care and education for their children. They want more responsive and accountable governments that work to create opportunities for all, regardless of ethnicity or economic class. They want to have access—to opportunities and to decision-making.

They are waiting to be heard.

Conclusions

The findings of this *Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings* project are very preliminary. Clearly, a much more comprehensive effort needs to be put into place before we can draw firm conclusions on the circumstances and views of common people across the globe. Despite this fact, the answers we heard were amazingly similar, with common themes that are easy to identify. Apparently, the reality of peoples' lives in many parts of the world are both *similar* and *similarly understood*.

A massive project called "*Voices of the Poor*," undertaken by the World Bank in the 1990's[3], compiled interviews from a total of over 60,000 people (in some cases taken from other sources). Their results were similar to ours, although much more comprehensive. Key findings emerging from that project included the following:

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[3] The research findings have been published for the World Bank by Oxford University Press in a three-volume series: (1) Can Anyone Hear Us? analyzes the voices of over 40,000 poor women and men in 50 countries from participatory poverty assessments carried out by the World Bank in the 1990s; (2) Crying Out for Change pulls together reports on fieldwork conducted in 1999 in 23 countries involving over 20,000 poor men and women; and (3) From Many Lands offers regional patterns and country case studies.

- The poor view well-being holistically: poverty is much more than income alone. For the poor, the good life or well-being is multidimensional, with both material and psychological dimensions.

- Insecurity has increased, and violence is on the rise, both domestically and in the society.

- The poor feel they have been bypassed by new economic opportunities.

- Gender inequity is widespread, domestic violence pervasive and gender relations stressed: Loss of traditional male "breadwinner role" and female "caretaker role" (because of changing economic circumstances) is traumatic for both genders, and family breakdown, domestic violence and increased alcoholism among men are often mentioned.

- Corruption emerges as a key poverty issue: the poor want governments and state institutions to be more accountable to them.

- Health care is unavailable or too expensive.

- Education received by young people is inadequate.

- NGOs are seen as important but many unaccountable

- The poor rely on informal networks and local institutions to survive, including the local holy man and the local nurse.

Perhaps the most important dimension to our *Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings* project, and the element that sets us apart from the World Bank study, is that these Field Hearings were conducted by Partners who have an on-going relationship to the people and communities in which the Field Hearings were held. This means that there is a strong sense of expectation on the part of Field Hearing participants, and sense of obligation on the part of the Partners (including IfE), to do something more than just talk about the identified problems. This project is seen as the first step in a larger effort to address underlying causes of the difficult circumstances afflicting poor, disempowered, marginalized, and common people across the globe. We invite your participation and support.

Future plans for project
Most of those who participated in this project to the end were very excited about the process and its potential for establishing good working relationships with local communities based on careful listening. Community members themselves also expressed support for continuation of the project.

Initiative for Equality and many of the Field Hearing Partners plan to seek future funding in order to scale up the Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings over the upcoming years. We plan to extend the effort by drawing in new Partners and conducting Field Hearings in more communities, including expanding to Latin America, North America, and across Europe. A final, more extensive report will then be published. Ultimately, we think the Field Hearings process merits becoming institutionalized as an ongoing methodology for drawing in the voices of those who are still "waiting to be heard." Please contact us if you are interested in partnering with this on-going project.

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