

# **Strengthening civil society's accountability for results: the opportunity of comparative constituency feedback**

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## **Introduction**

This paper will present some innovative new ways in which citizen organizations<sup>1</sup> gather feedback from the constituents of their development interventions in order to build stronger relationships and improve their effectiveness. It presents a work in progress and some findings from initial applications of comparative constituency feedback surveys in the development field.

The underlying assumption is that the people most affected by our work are best placed to let us know what works well and what doesn't. It responds to the growing criticism of a lack of accountability and power imbalances in the development cooperation sector as a whole and among civil society organizations and private philanthropic institutions in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the terms citizen organization and sector to include nonprofits, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGO), as well as private grant-making philanthropic foundations.

There is general agreement that the last 50 years of large scale philanthropy and development cooperation through public agencies and non-governmental actors have failed to deliver what they promised. This is well documented in recent publications,<sup>2</sup> and has led to a growing movement in the sector working to increase aid effectiveness.

Two main issues arise. The first one is that we, as a sector, need to become much better at measuring our performance and impact and learning from this how to become more effective. The second one is that in this process we need to ensure that our practice is transparent and inclusive of the people that our work is meant to benefit, who are the primary constituents in the system.

Interestingly, while there is no consensus in the sector about how to achieve the above stated objectives, there is consensus that both need to be addressed.

The paper is constructed in two parts. The first part gives an overview of the argument that meaningful representation of constituency voice is likely to increase the effectiveness of aid. The second part presents one specific innovation in bringing the voices of constituents into decision-making: the independent comparative constituency feedback survey. This technique bears much in common with customer satisfaction surveying in the business world, and was first developed in the civil society space by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP)<sup>3</sup> to survey grantees of private foundations in the USA. Keystone is currently adapting the grantmaker-grantee application in different developing world contexts.

The paper will also examine the opportunities for applying comparative feedback surveys to other relationships in the development power pyramid, such as

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: Easterly, W. 2006. *The White Man's Burden. Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. New York: The Penguin Press and Dichter, T. 2003. *Despite Good Intentions, Why Development Assistance to the Third World has Failed*. Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press

<sup>3</sup> [www.effectivephilanthropy.org](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org)

between nonprofits and their direct beneficiaries, international NGOs and their field-based partners, or multi-stakeholder global networks and their members.

## **I. Accountability to constituents: voice and effectiveness**

Civil society organizations' accountability to their constituents and particularly to its primary constituents is widely debated.<sup>4</sup>

In the last few years, it has been made evident that, while the organizations of the citizen sector put a lot of effort and resources in upwards accountability and 'external' accountability to public and private donors, little progress has been made in assuring the sector's downwards accountability to its other constituents and stakeholders. Subsequently there has been an important call for developing mechanisms that assure the citizen sector's accountability at all levels.<sup>5</sup>

Nelson Mandela reflecting on current practice in the human development field said: 'I have found that those who enjoy the most power and influence – even with the best of intentions – tend to over-rely on their own counsel. We see in most anti-poverty programmes, for example, a lack of accountability by donors and NGOs to the people who are meant to benefit from them.'<sup>6</sup>

The citizen sector is accused of maintaining the old 19<sup>th</sup> century 'charity mindset' despite its protestations to the contrary. Most organizations are self-appointed

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<sup>4</sup> 'Constituents' has a more narrow meaning than 'stakeholders'. While stakeholders are all the people and institutions that are affected positively or negatively by an organization's decisions and actions, the term 'constituents' refers to the three core actors in development interventions: those that provide resources (funders), those that implement programs (often CSOs or partners), and those most affected by the interventions. A commonly used term for the latter is 'beneficiary', but the passivity that this term implies makes it unsuitable in developmental processes. We prefer to call them 'primary constituents'.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Jordan, L. 2005. Mechanisms for NGO Accountability. *Global Public Policy Institute*. Research Paper Series, 3

<sup>6</sup> Commenting on Nelson Mandela Foundation partnership with Keystone. 2005

and lack representation of the voices of those most affected by their actions. It is argued that this top-down approach to development is failing the poor and that donors and NGOs treat recipients as powerless, voiceless entities rather than active partners in a working relationship.<sup>7</sup> The increasingly widely held conclusion is that the failure of aid is rooted partly in the fact that those who are meant to reap the benefits are not in position to hold those who administer and distribute aid to account.<sup>8</sup>

Promoting accountability and voice are therefore key elements for addressing the failure of aid. There is a widely spread belief among social change practitioners that working in a way that respectfully engages those meant to benefit will improve outcomes. Since the 1950s, a range of ‘participatory methodologies’ have emerged, including Participatory Rural Appraisal, Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation, Participatory Action Learning, Participatory Poverty Appraisal, Appreciative Enquiry among others. This practitioners’ approach has been validated in the academic field, which has clearly linked freeing human agency to development outcomes: aid recipients must be seen as “active agents of change, rather as passive recipients of dispensed benefits”; the “achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people”.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, opinion research of civil society leaders has shown that the quality of an organization’s work is often directly linked to the quality of the relationship it maintains with its beneficiaries.<sup>10</sup> Consequently there has been a significant trend in the aid sector that links downwards accountability, voice and quality of interventions. This view is present in various initiatives, most notably the high-level process led by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) around the Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness which

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<sup>7</sup> Eyben, R. 2006. *Relationships for Aid*. London: Earthscan

<sup>8</sup> Easterly, W. *op.cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Sen, A. 2000. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Xiii, 4

<sup>10</sup> See Keystone and AccountAbility. 2006. *A BOND Approach to Quality in Non-Governmental Organizations: Putting Beneficiaries First*. Available from: <http://www.bond.org.uk/pubs/quality/report.pdf> (accessed on 14 June 2008)

was adopted in 2005. The two main points of the Declaration are: 1) we need to monitor and measure our results, and 2) actors in the development sector need to engage in mutually accountable relationships.<sup>11</sup>

Keystone's work with organizations around the world over the past four years suggests that mutually accountable learning relationships between an implementing organization and its constituents are highly predictive of its effectiveness and impact.

Systems and methodology for organizations to meaningfully enable constituency voice and feedback in their work can contribute significantly to enhancing the effectiveness of the sector. First, constituency voice can contribute to the validation of our claims; are we really achieving what we said we would and are we missing anything? Second, it can provide metrics and data and fill the current gap in the informational basis upon which we make philanthropic and social investment decisions<sup>12</sup>, third, and most importantly, it helps us learn about what works and what doesn't so that we can improve future practice.

Constituency voice comes about when all constituents, especially those most affected, participate meaningfully in defining success, planning activities toward outcomes, and evaluating and learning from results. Relationships across the entire value chain can be reframed on the basis of constituency feedback leading to genuine learning dialogues. Simple and practical dialogue among constituents can build the confidence and trust that underwrites success. One way for

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<sup>11</sup> See the Paris Declaration dedicated pages on the OECD website: [http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_35401554\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html) (accessed on 14 June 2008)

<sup>12</sup> For more on the informational basis for social investment decisions, see Bonbright, D. "What do we need to know?" *Alliance Magazine*. 12, no 4. December 2007: 29-33. See also Paul Brest, "Creating an Online Information Marketplace for Giving", in *2006 Annual Report*, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Available from: <http://annualreport.hewlett.org/statement/index.asp> (accessed on 14 June 2008). In this essay the President of the foundation proposes the creation of an online information marketplace which will provide the necessary data for funders to make their philanthropic decisions, among others: "Reviews of the organization by its beneficiaries and other constituents and interested parties".

catalysing dialogue is through comparative constituency feedback surveys as presented in the following section.

## **II. The Opportunity of Comparative Constituency Feedback**

The idea behind CCF surveys is for an independent agent, using a carefully designed standard questionnaire, to anonymously collect feedback from organizations' constituents on key aspects of their performance. Because they can speak anonymously, constituents can be truthful in their feedback without fear of any consequences. They give feedback on the impact of the organization's policy and practice on the constituents and on the field in which it operates in general as well as on specific dimensions of its performance. The resulting constituency feedback report tells an organization both what its constituents say in response to the survey questions and how those answers compare with the answers of the other organizations participating in the survey. Comparative data enable an organization to understand its performance in a particular dimension of its work in relation to like-organizations and is particularly useful in pinpointing areas where strengthening investments may be required.

### **The process**

The questionnaire is administered simultaneously to a common group of constituents of a cohort of organizations so that each organization participating in the survey can compare what its constituents say about its performance with what others' constituents are saying about those other organizations. The comparative dimension corrects for bias in feedback and helps participating organizations identify successful practice and areas for improvement.

In the customized confidential reports to each organization in the survey, organizations are encouraged to reflect and act upon the data by reporting back to their constituents on the findings and to engage with them in dialogue about how to improve performance.

A general report can aggregate the results of all participating organizations and over time start to predict trends across the field.

### **Potential benefits**

The potential benefits from such a process are many. At the individual organization level, data resulting from CCF surveys provide new insight about the impact of organizations on their constituents; the feedback reports inform the organizations' assessments of their work and help them learn and refine their approaches and strategies. Feedback from constituents informs organizations' understanding of important, new aspects of their performance (and the relationships between constituents' perceptions and the organizations' intended outcomes). It puts crucial information in the hands of staff to inform improvement efforts – providing an insight into constituency views that is only possible in a survey process that is rigorous, ensures confidentiality and candor, and includes comparative data to allow for an understanding of relative strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the process enables organizations to renew their relationships with constituents on the basis of new, important and independent data.

At the social change field level, the general aggregate report provides the 'field' or 'system' level description of the work of a particular type of organization (foundation, INGO, non-profit, global network) from the points of view of constituents. This is particularly useful for assessing the performance of a kind of organization but also for allowing comparisons between different types of actors in the development field. It contributes to an imagination for system level thinking

and planning. It sends a powerful message to the wider sector of development cooperation about the importance of understanding how constituents are experiencing organizations in the field. It sets an example to other organizations in the field of how to hear the voices of those affected by their work – guarding against the kind of insularity that can develop within institutions.

The information gathered through this process helps other organizations in the field to refine their strategies. Additionally, results from the surveys assist citizen sector infrastructure institutions to develop appropriate technical assistance and resources to support organizations in the field.

The participating organizations, and through them the field as a whole, grows in legitimacy as a result of their visible efforts to be accountable to their constituents.

Finally, and most importantly, the survey empowers constituents by amplifying their voice. The surveys offer new ways for constituents to make their voices heard by organizations further up the power pyramid. The process includes the formulation of a response to the feedback that can be used to engage in a mutual learning dialogue with constituents. Such conversations are potentially transformative and are certainly empowering and create new opportunities for constituents to engage with organizations and increase their stake in their work.

## ***Enhancing grantmaker accountability and effectiveness through comparative grantee feedback***

### **CEP's experience**

For a long time, private foundations' accountability for delivering results has been an issue that no one thought about. The money that they give away is money generated usually by an individual successful in business, or an inheritor, who has decided to give something 'back' to society. "It's their money, therefore why should they account about how they spend it?"

Private foundations have played a very important role in the social change field, especially in the US, by providing resources to what the State wouldn't fund. But in the past years, criticism has been growing about their role in the social change field and the value that they're adding. Joel Fleishman has recently called them among the 'least accountable' institutions in society, referring to their decision-making process and the arrogance with which many of them run their operations.<sup>13</sup>

In a breakthrough article published in 1999, Mark Kramer and Michael Porter raised the challenge to foundations: "Whether foundations are fulfilling their potential is an open question. Not enough foundations think strategically about how they can create value in society with the resources they have at their disposal. Little effort is devoted to measuring results. On the contrary, foundations often consider measuring performance to be unrelated to their charitable mission".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fleishman, J. 2007. *The Foundation, A Great American Secret. How Private Wealth Is Changing the World*. New York: Public Affairs

<sup>14</sup> Kramer, M and Porter, M. "Philanthropy's New Agenda: Creating Value". *Harvard Business Review*. November-December 1999:122

This sort of results-oriented thinking applied to the foundation field has created a significant shift in foundation mind-sets and has set the ground for the work of the Center for Effective Philanthropy which helps foundations focus on their performance by providing them with data on how they are perceived by their grantees and other stakeholders.

CEP was founded by Mark Kramer and Michael Porter shortly after the publication of their article in the Harvard Business Review. In its 8 years of existence the Center has carried out extensive research on indicators of performance of philanthropic institutions and how to measure it. It has developed a series of assessment tools that are widely applied in the north-American philanthropic sector.<sup>15</sup>

By far the most well-known and applied CEP tool is the Grantee Perception Report® (GPR). This is an assessment tool that provides foundation boards, CEOs and staff with comparative data on grantee perceptions of foundation performance on a variety of dimensions<sup>16</sup>:

- Impact on the grantees' field (understanding and knowledge of the field, impact on public policy, impact on the local communities)
- Impact on the grantees' organization (sustainability of the funded work, grantee satisfaction)
- Interactions with grantees (communication of foundation's goals and strategy, consistency of communications)
- Non-monetary assistance to grantees
- Assistance securing funding from other sources (impact of funding assistance, impact of reputation in funding assistance)

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<sup>15</sup> For an overview of CEP's assessment tools see: [http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/assessment/assessment\\_overview.html](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/assessment/assessment_overview.html) (accessed on 14 June 2008)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/assessment/assessment\\_gpr.html](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/assessment/assessment_gpr.html) (accessed on 14 June 2008)

- Helpfulness of grant administration process (selection, reporting and evaluation processes, dollar return on grantee administrative hours)

To this day, 150 foundations in the USA have commissioned GPR reports including 7 of the largest 10 foundations in the country.

A study commissioned by CEP has shown that US foundations find significant value in GPR reports: “Many of these foundations had conducted grantee surveys or other types of assessment (focus groups or interviews) in the past, but in the absence of comparative data were left with questions about how to interpret the results. Thus, the GPR contributes significant added value by providing a benchmark for interpreting results at a cost that is similar to or less than the expense of other third-party grantee survey efforts”.<sup>17</sup> Most importantly, the new data have led to improvements in organizational practice in foundations. According to the same study 100% of foundations reported that the GPR resulted in some change in their practices.<sup>18</sup> The areas where more changes were inspired by the GPR were in improving the engagement and the quality of communications with grantees and simplifying grant administration procedures.<sup>19</sup>

GPR reports have created an opportunity for sincere dialogue between foundations and their grantees, which “historically have been wary of speaking out against their supporters for fear of losing money”.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the reports have fostered a new form of ‘downwards’ accountability by creating a safe space for those further down the power pyramid to have their voice heard.

Furthermore, GPR surveys have offered an opportunity for foundations to become more transparent in their functioning and report back to their grantees and the wider public. In 2004, the William and Flora Hewlett foundation decided

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<sup>17</sup> LaFrance Associates. 2007. *Key Findings from the Grantee Perception Report (GPR) Subscriber Assessment*: 6. Available from: [http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/images/pdfs/CEP\\_GPR\\_LFA\\_2007\\_report.pdf](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/images/pdfs/CEP_GPR_LFA_2007_report.pdf) (accessed on 14 June 2008)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*: 10

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*: 11

<sup>20</sup> Wilhelm, I. “Giving Charities a Voice”. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. 10 November 2005: 2

to make the findings from its GPR report public on its website<sup>21</sup> and other foundations followed. Today 8 foundations publish their complete GPR reports and 15 publish excerpts.<sup>22</sup> By opting for transparency and putting these data in the public domain, foundations voluntarily put themselves in public scrutiny; they have to react on the data, as they will be held accountable by public opinion if no improvements are made in the areas identified by the survey.

GPR reports have also been very useful for advancing our knowledge on the grantmaking field as a whole, as they have informed a series of papers on grantee perceptions.<sup>23</sup> They have also been an inspiration for the pilot projects that we will examine below.

### **Taking comparative grantee feedback internationally – A pilot project with East African grantmakers**

Keystone is a citizen organization that has the mission to help social purpose organizations increase their effectiveness by being inclusive of and responsive to the voices of their constituents. Keystone has been closely involved with CEP staff and has been exploring the idea to replicate the success of CEP in the US in different contexts.

Since early this year, an exciting pilot project has been unfolding in East Africa that will for the first time empower grantees to speak freely to their funders and give grantmakers new insight into the experience and perceptions of their grantees. Inspired by the CEP model, it is hoped that the project will generate

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<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.hewlett.org/More/Grantee+Perception+Report> (accessed on 15 June 2008)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/assessment/assessment\\_gpr.html](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/assessment/assessment_gpr.html) (accessed on 16 June 2008)

<sup>23</sup> See for example: CEP. 2002. *Indicators of Effectiveness: Understanding and Improving Foundation Performance*. Available from: <http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/images/pdfs/indicatorsofeffectiveness.pdf> (accessed on 14 June 2008), CEP. 2006. *In Search of Impact: Practices and Perceptions in Foundations' Provision of Program and Operating Grants to Nonprofits*. Available from: [http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/images/pdfs/CEP\\_In\\_Search\\_of\\_Impact.pdf](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/images/pdfs/CEP_In_Search_of_Impact.pdf) (accessed on 14 June 2008)

learning, improve relationships and foster more effective grantmaking and developmental practice in the region.

The central element of the project is a comparative grantee feedback survey, designed and implemented by Keystone with the assistance of the Kenya-based organization Allavida.<sup>24</sup> It is funded by the Ford Foundation's East Africa office<sup>25</sup> and has twelve participating grantmakers who are serious about listening to their grantees to become more effective.

The survey instrument follows the CEP model in many aspects but goes deeper on specific issues such as the quality of dialogue and communications between grantees and grantmakers. By so doing it is exploring the limits of using quantitative measures to analyse qualitative information such as how open, free and equal the dialogue is.<sup>26</sup> It also probes more deeply into grantee perceptions of the informational basis upon which funding decisions are made by analysing the information that grantees are required to submit in their grant applications. Furthermore, the pilot simplifies the language used in the surveys to avoid jargon that may intimidate grantees.

The cohort of participating grantmakers includes landmark international foundations (the Ford Foundation and the Aga Khan Development Network<sup>27</sup>), indigenous corporate foundations such as the Safaricom Foundation<sup>28</sup> and Kenya Central Bank Foundation<sup>29</sup>, new intermediary community foundations such as the Kenya Community Development Foundation<sup>30</sup>, and the Foundation

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<sup>24</sup> [www.allavida.org](http://www.allavida.org)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.fordfound.org/regions/easternafrika/overview> (accessed on 15 June 2008)

<sup>26</sup> See Jacobson, T. "A Case for the Quantitative Assessment of Participatory Communication Programs." *Glocal Times*, Issue 9. 23 November 2007. Available from: <http://webzone.k3.mah.se/projects/gt2/viewarticle.aspx?articleID=134&issueID=15> (accessed on 16 June 2008)

<sup>27</sup> [www.akdn.org](http://www.akdn.org)

<sup>28</sup> [www.safaricomfoundation.org](http://www.safaricomfoundation.org)

<sup>29</sup> [www.kcbbankgroup.com/fo/index.php](http://www.kcbbankgroup.com/fo/index.php)

<sup>30</sup> [www.kcdfoundation.org](http://www.kcdfoundation.org)

for Civil Society in Tanzania<sup>31</sup>, and private indigenous philanthropy organizations such as the Rattansi Educational Trust<sup>32</sup>. The pilot therefore pushes comparisons to the limit by including diverse foundations. This will allow for comparisons in each one of the sub-sets but will also tell us what kind of meaningful comparisons can or cannot be made among the different sub-sets.

Nothing similar has ever been done in Africa. Over time it is hoped that the comparative surveys will facilitate the emergence of a quality standard for grantmakers by grantmakers in collaboration with their grantees. Certainly it will help them learn and become more strategic about their practices. Different strengths might be demonstrated, such as the greater ability of community grantmakers to provide support to grassroots community organizations, which could facilitate powerful collaborative partnerships that utilise the particular strengths of different grantmaker types.

The pilot also seeks to reinforce the collaborative side of the comparative grantee feedback process. Although each grantmaker has complete control over the release of their own results, Keystone will seek to broker learning relationships among the funders in the project as long as both parties are in full agreement, so that best practice can be disseminated across the field.

Some of the challenges that Keystone is facing in the application of comparative grantee feedback surveys in a developing context are the following:

- Finding local capacity for the statistical analysis of the data. The project is currently run from Keystone's South African office, but upon completion of the pilot, and assuming that it is successful, the intention is to build East African capacity for implementing the surveys in the future.

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<sup>31</sup> [www.thefoundation-tz.org](http://www.thefoundation-tz.org)

<sup>32</sup> [www.rattansieducationaltrust.or.ke](http://www.rattansieducationaltrust.or.ke)

- Covering the costs for the survey and report production. The current pilot is funded by the Ford Foundation as a grant intended to strengthen the field of African grantmaking, but future sustainability will depend on grantmakers finding the data useful enough to meet survey costs themselves. Keeping costs as low as possible is important, especially as the community grantmakers have very limited discretionary resources to draw from. One possible model would involve a sliding fee scale that enabled the better off grantmakers to cross-subsidize participation of other grantmakers. The rationale for this is twofold. First, they benefit individually from having a more robust cohort of grantmakers in the survey cohort. Second, the entire comparative grantee feedback process contributes to the development of the grantmaking field as a whole.
- Lack of reliable communications infrastructure. Many of the grantees are based in remote areas with no or little access to electronic communications (internet, email) and where the reliability of conventional communications (post) is not guaranteed.
- Low educational level of some grantees. Due to varying levels of literacy and previous experience with written questionnaires among the grantees, there is a need to simplify the language of the questionnaire and explore effective ways for collecting feedback. At the moment the pilot is experimenting with the least costly way for administering the surveys, which is sending paper questionnaires translated into local languages by post with enclosed pre-franked envelopes. For those with internet access, it is experimenting with simple interactive PDF response formats. One of the issues that the pilot is examining is which segments of the surveyed populations cope well with the written method and for which it would be necessary in the future to apply oral data collection techniques by employing face-to-face interviewers.
- Diversity of the grantmaker group. Some of the indigenous grantmaker organizations in the pilot are very young, with less than 2 years of operations. Some of their programmes are under-developed and they lack

clearly articulated strategies. There is a challenge in coming up with a common questionnaire that will allow for meaningful comparisons among these and the more experienced and well-established foundations in the group. In addition, some of the grantmakers in the cohort are re-granters. It would be interesting to see if there is a difference in how the ‘retailers’ of grants are perceived in relation to the ‘wholesalers’ and assess if the local intermediary grantmaking model is an effective one as seen through the eyes of the grantees.<sup>33</sup>

- Self-perception of grantees. Another challenge that the pilot is facing is how to overcome a culture generated by decades of local populations being treated as passive recipients of aid with little tradition of having voice. A deeply rooted mentality of “don’t bite the hand that feeds you” may skew the survey results. However, there are signs that this situation is changing and processes that enable voice and agency, such as the comparative grantee surveys, help transform the landscape. The anonymity of the process encourages honest feedback and the comparative analysis can show variations among grantmakers even in the case where the feedback is overly positive.
- Finally, the obvious challenge in applying such a process at an international context is the translation of the surveys in the local language. In the case of this pilot the surveys are administered in English and Swahili.<sup>34</sup> This represents challenges in terms of increasing the costs of the administration of the surveys and the data input and analysis.

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<sup>33</sup> This question is explored in another Keystone pilot project in South Africa with support from the Ford Foundation. There, Keystone is exploring comparative constituency feedback surveys in two directions along the grantmaking value chain. Turning around the pivotal role of “grant retailers”, surveys are being formulated that will assess “grant retailers” perceptions of their donors, the “grant wholesalers”. Surveys are also being administered downwards to the grantees of “grant retailers”.

<sup>34</sup> The questionnaire is also translated in French by the Urgent Action Fund for Women which wants to administer the survey to its West African grantees. The data from West African grantees will not however be included in the comparative reports resulting from this pilot.

If this pilot is successful in bringing the voices of grantees into decision making, then the next step is to develop similar feedback survey methods for the grantees to hear and respond to the anonymous feedback from their primary constituents – those who are meant to benefit from the grants.

## ***The next frontier for comparative constituency feedback: primary constituents***

This section examines two initiatives that are already exploring the possibility of implementing surveys for collecting comparative feedback from primary constituents. They are based on the assumption that different types of social purpose organizations can benefit from comparable perceptual data from their constituents in very much the same way as foundations do. A detailed investigation of this hypothesis with a relevant set of practitioners is taking place in view to develop and demonstrate constituency perception surveys as a tool to enhance effectiveness and accountability to constituents.

### **Feedback from primary constituents of children and family serving agencies**

Organizations providing critical services to vulnerable children and families need to better determine the status of their relationships with the end users of their services (constituents) as well as their own effectiveness, in order to advance meaningful change in their communities.

Many organizations have experience with ‘client surveys’ (mostly in regard to needs and attitudes) and find them useful – but many also feel that they could do much more. There is an opportunity to explore more systematic and cost-effective ways to get meaningful qualitative and quantitative data to enhance relationships and effectiveness. In contrast to some of the approaches employed

by human service groups and foundations in recent years, comparative constituency feedback has the potential to provide more meaning and value.

In the USA Keystone, the Alliance for Children and Families (ACF)<sup>35</sup> and United Neighbourhood Centers of America (UNCA)<sup>36</sup> are undertaking a planning process whose goal is to prepare the organizations within the human services field for the implementation of a pilot of a CCF project. The underlying purposes of the project are:

- To honour and deepen the value of constituency voice
- To provide high quality, meaningful and comparative data to a set of human service providers to inform and improve organizational performance
- To explore the transformative potentials of the CCF

The CCF pilot project planning process has three main outputs:

1. A paper for the human services field around comparative constituency feedback that, *inter alia*, places the work in the context of other programme improvement approaches, identifies the key barriers to implementing comparative constituency feedback (through focus groups and interviews with Alliance and UNCA members), and develops strategies to overcome these barriers and mitigate risks.
2. A prototype for a comparative constituency feedback survey for field development into a scalable method/tool with a pioneer cohort of Alliance and UNCA members.
3. A learning group of foundations and human service agencies dedicated to plumbing the transformative potential of constituency voice.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> [www.alliance1.org](http://www.alliance1.org)

<sup>36</sup> [www.unca.org](http://www.unca.org)

<sup>37</sup> The learning group includes pilot project funders The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ([www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)) and the David & Lucile Packard Foundation ([www.packard.org](http://www.packard.org)), as well as a number of other prominent US foundations.

More specifically the project will examine the history of performance and outcome measurement in the human services field and why constituency feedback has not sustained itself or spread widely over time. It will uncover the various barriers and risks that organizations face in implementing constituency feedback and will develop strategies to overcome barriers and mitigate risks.

The planning process will establish a framework for running a pilot comparative constituency feedback survey for children and family servicing agencies. For this it will establish the breadth and profiles of types of organizations to include in the pilot, constitute a policy advisory board for the pilot and will make recommendations for mitigating the possible risks involved for the participating agencies. The results of the planning process and the initiation of the pilot project are expected in the final quarter of 2008.

### **The Student Voice Initiative**

Another exploratory exercise is being undertaken by CEP and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to examine the potential to extend its approach and methodology to collect feedback from program beneficiaries and recipients—those whose lives a foundation directly seeks to improve.<sup>38</sup>

In this case the envisioned instrument would survey how students experience the foundation-funded schools across a wide range of dimensions and would present the results both in aggregate and school-by-school.

The Student Voice Initiative will investigate the current landscape in collecting feedback from students and will develop and analyse options for a pilot project. It is hoped that the initiative will be able to generate a model that could be widely applicable to the relationships between foundations, grantees and those who are ultimately meant to benefit from their work.

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<sup>38</sup> [http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/research/research\\_constituentvoice.html](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/research/research_constituentvoice.html) (accessed on 14 June 2008)

## ***Other possible applications in the social change ecosystem***

### **Feedback from field-based partners for International NGOs**

Many international NGOs (INGOs) are looking at how to increase their effectiveness by measuring their progress, understanding their impact and learning how to improve while ensuring their accountability to their constituents.<sup>39</sup> Although many NGOs directly implement programmes in developing countries, the prevailing cooperation model in the last years has been through funding and capacity building of locally based counterparts. This is seen as a more sustainable model, first because those counterparts are better placed for understanding the realities of the context in which they operate and second because this is a way for building local capacity that could be sustained in the long term without external assistance. Keystone is now exploring the possibility of applying comparative constituency feedback in the relationships between international NGOs with headquarters in the UK and their field-based partners.

The survey will look at the individual performance of INGOs through the eyes of their counterparts in a way very similar to that of the comparative grantee feedback surveys, although with a special focus on non-monetary assistance. Furthermore the project will examine the possibility for extending the application of CCF along the aid value chain: downwards, to survey the perceptions of the field-based partners' beneficiaries or upwards, to survey the INGOs' on the performance and contributions of their institutional donors.

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<sup>39</sup> For example ActionAid has developed an Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) which allows the participation of economically poor people and partner organizations in all the stages of the design and implementation of its strategy.  
<http://www.actionaid.org/main.aspx?PageID=261> (accessed on 15 June 2008)

## **Constituency feedback for global action networks**

The complexities of today's truly global issues require new forms of engagement and organizational structures. To meet these challenges, new types of organizations called Global Action Networks (GANs) are emerging. Engaging a diverse group of stakeholders crossing sector, region and societal lines, GANs demonstrate a unique capacity for achieving real impacts in our increasingly interconnected world.<sup>40</sup>

Due to their cross-sectoral nature and network structure, GANs face a number of unique challenges not often encountered by more traditional organizations. Traditional means for evaluating organizations through a hierarchical structure are not appropriate for evaluating cross-sectoral networks. Instead networks are participatory, evoking equal engagement, creativity and ownership at all levels. Unlike traditional organizations, networks are voluntary, making participation essential and allowing members to set the agenda rather than organizational elites. Members share a common vision but have unique strategies for achieving such a vision. Furthermore, tangible outcomes of their work can rarely be identified; their value lies in the influence that they have in the system which is difficult to identify and attribute.<sup>41</sup>

In such a context, data generated by the perception of a network's members and other constituents offer an opportunity for quantifying intangibles such as influence and demonstrate contributions to certain outcomes in fields like conflict prevention, conservation of world fish stocks or decrease in corruption levels. With their community of practice focused on improving impact planning and

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<sup>40</sup> For more information on this new form of governance as well as list of identified GANs, see: [www.gan-net.net](http://www.gan-net.net)

<sup>41</sup> For more on the challenges in network evaluation, see Ricardo Wilson-Grau's presentation "Complexity and Evaluation in International Networks" at MDF's seminar "M&E on the cutting edge". Ede, 14 December 2006. Available from: <http://www.ngorisk.org/pdf/Complexity%20and%20Evaluation%20in%20International%20Networks%20MDF%20December%202006,%20PowerPoint.pdf> (accessed on 15 June 2008)

learning, a number of leading global action networks are now undertaking a pilot project to develop a common questionnaire for gathering comparative constituency feedback.<sup>42</sup>

## **Expected outcome: Whole system accountability, transparency and responsiveness**

The applications of comparative grantee feedback surveys by CEP in the last 8 years have clearly demonstrated the capacity of the method to bring about positive outcomes in helping foundations make more informed decisions for improving their performance. The fact that many of the foundations have decided to make their grantee perception reports publicly available has considerably increased the sector's accountability and transparency.

Now there is an opportunity, through the pilot projects presented in this paper, to replicate this success for the whole aid system. It is possible to imagine an international system where feedback loops are generated from the primary constituent (ultimate beneficiary) level, through to international NGOs and networks, all the way up to those who hold the resources, private foundations and, why not, international public donors.

Comparative constituency feedback surveys are only one way of doing this. Surveys cannot tell us everything, but they allow a large number of respondents to feel secure in giving honest anonymous feedback on many aspects of organizational performance that it is not possible to capture in other ways – especially when the power imbalances are marked as between providers and

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<sup>42</sup> To follow the progress of this initiative, see: [http://www.gan-net.net/institutions\\_people/cop\\_measuring\\_impact.html](http://www.gan-net.net/institutions_people/cop_measuring_impact.html)

recipients of development aid. They do not replace other forms of dialogue, but can richly stimulate and complement it.

Comparative constituency feedback offers an opportunity to unleash the potential of constituency voice, where all the actors in the system are active agents of change and engage in genuine generative dialogue and mutually accountable relationships. We can create the data sets that will help us improve our work on the basis of the most reliable informational basis: the voice of those who are meant to benefit from our efforts.