

Karen Peachey: Hello, I'm Karen Peachey, you're listening to CashCast. In the last episode, we heard how large parts of the aid system seem unable or unwilling to listen to the voices of people affected by crisis in a way that leads to change. We heard how the structure of the humanitarian system is making it hard for the system to respond in the way that people in crisis want.

We also heard how this results in an outcome that's not ideal for the people receiving aid, or indeed, people who are giving it. So in this episode, we're exploring an alternative. A different way to think about aid, which has gained popularity in recent years. The idea of people centered aid. The name is seemingly self explanatory.

Aid that focuses on the needs of people. But what does this look like in practice, particularly in the form of cash and voucher assistance? How can we know if it's being done well? And what makes it different from other similar initiatives in the past? Have we been here before? Let's dive in.

Innocent Tshilombo: No matter the size or the urgency, there's nothing urgent, like preserving the dignity of people. We can't just walk over dignity because we want to rush something that in the end will turn back to us and even to the community, because imagine that we rush into implementing something that doesn't add any value to the community. That is a useless resource.

Karen Peachey: That's Innocent Tshilombo. You might remember him from the last episode. Innocent speaks from experience on the importance of people-centered aid. He fled the Democratic Republic of Congo more than a decade ago, and as a refugee he's received different forms of humanitarian assistance.

Innocent now works as a humanitarian and has a master's degree in humanitarian action. His experiences as a refugee have strongly informed his perspectives, giving him a really clear view of what works and what doesn't. Unfortunately, his earliest experience within the humanitarian system were not particularly people centred.

Innocent Tshilombo: I fled the country because that's when there were a lot of turmoil. I came for safe haven so that I can find somewhere I could get rest. I kept going with my life because it was really dangerous for me in the DRC. I needed immediate assistance and I received it. I received some shelter. I received some food ration.

I received some healthcare, which was really very important for me, given that I was really in need of receiving some relief. And as times went by, I realised that

they needed more than basic needs because, you know, you can survive for a few days but, you know, needs keep changing.

Karen Peachey: When Innocent first arrived at Kakuma Refugee Camp, different agencies were offering food, shelter, healthcare and other forms of support.

While this met some of his basic needs, there were gaps. After nearly five years in the camp, a new voucher program was introduced.

Innocent Tshilombo: And the cash voucher assistance was not really money, like hard currency, which was not that straightforward for people to do everything that they wanted to do with that. And a very key aspect about it was you needed to first receive your in kind assistance for you to be eligible to receive that voucher for that month.

If you failed for one reason or another to collect your in kind assistance, automatically, uh, you're excluded from the voucher assistance for that month.

Karen Peachey: As well as the conditions attached to receiving the vouchers, the vouchers could only be spent on certain items. These restrictions led to new problems.

Innocent Tshilombo: They were specified to certain commodities, such as milk, sugar, or anything that is, uh, food items. And in the process, people might need to buy a candle, but they can't give you a candle, because it's not a food item. If I need a candle, I need to talk to the shop attendant to ask them, I need a candle. A candle will not be given at the market price because I'm not buying with cash.

I'm using a voucher and they know that the voucher has that restriction. You know, they take advantage of it. And for people who want to convert it into pure cash, it was losing up to 60 percent of the value. If a voucher is for \$10, then they'll give you \$6 because you want it in another way. That is not restricted, and that was not allowed actually because the organizations were really monitoring that to ensure that traders are not exchanging voucher. But they could not control that. That was beyond, since people have their choice. They know what they want. They know what is good for them right now, and they accept even to lose almost half of the voucher value just to receive or to obtain what they want. If the program is not well designed, it creates even more and more vulnerability. Because someone who's supposed to live on 10 dollar in a month, now they're living on a 6 dollars.

Karen Peachey: As Innocent makes clear, if the type of aid given is not what people want, they will sell it. Even if it means losing some of the value. Innocent also believes the program should be planned to help people think about the future, not just the now.

Innocent Tshilombo: A refugee camp should be seen as a transit place that should also prepare people for their next life. And if someone has been kept on the cycle of dependency, that person is being given something that will not help him or her to move to the next step. Because if people should go back to their home country, they will not receive free money.

If they should go be integrated in the host country, they won't receive free money, but they will work. They'll need to know how best they can invest, how best they can do businesses, how best they can take things in their own hands. And that responsibility should be given to people. So that at least they don't become too much dependent on aid. For me, cash voucher assistance, if implemented correctly, it can help people move from the cycle of dependency to the cycle of dependency. So for

Innocent, it sounds like good aid is not only about meeting people's needs in a way that they want, but also preparing them for the future. A life after humanitarian aid. I'm reminded of something Meg Sattler said in our last episode.

Meg Sattler: If there's one finding that is probably the most common to everything across Ground Truth, that people sort of really feel that what they need and want is something that will enable them to be able to think more about their tomorrows.

Karen Peachey: A theme that came up a lot in the last episode was the aid system's failure to listen. Or perhaps it's not so much about not listening, but not acting on what people say. As innocent puts it,

Innocent Tshilombo: People they're tired giving feedback because they don't hear back. You give recommendations, you make complaints. Or you ask questions, no one is attending, you know, you feed, but you don't get feedback.

Karen Peachey: That's something Meg Sattler agreed with.

Meg Sattler: You know, I think we just need to remember that people are human beings, and that if they say that they need something, they probably need it.

Karen Peachey: Perhaps one way to address this might be to have someone that can speak up on behalf of those affected people, both within aid organizations and with a broad set of external partners. A recipient advocate, perhaps?

Caroline Tetti: I'm actually really, really honored to hold this title. I haven't seen so many people with this title, but a really important one. When you're in a humanitarian situation, no one zipped your mouth from speaking. Neither did they block your ears from hearing. Someone can still listen to you. Someone can still speak to you.

Karen Peachey: That's Caroline Tetty, Director of Recipient Advocacy at GiveDirectly. Caroline is tasked with raising the voice of recipients with stakeholders both inside and outside the organization.

Caroline Tetti: A lot of times, unless we are careful, We may get lost in the nuances of the technicalities of delivering aid and forget about their vulnerabilities. The aim of having a recipient's advocate within GiveDirectly is to make sure that GiveDirectly and its partners and donors are always aware, listening to the needs of these people, and can always hold ourselves back to step back when we think, you know, either we are moving too fast for recipients. Or we need to make clarification for them to bring them up so they can be with us in our delivery of our work.

Karen Peachey: Caroline's role is pretty unusual in the humanitarian and development sector. It gives her some interesting insights into what more people centered aid might look like in practice.

Caroline Tetti: If we are going to be delivering cash and voucher assistance, the first thing is being people centered is understanding that even when people are in humanitarian situations, they still have the capability to make decisions about their lives.

They have the capability to decide how they can be able to get out of that situation and remedy themselves and their lives. In Cash and Voucher Assistance, therefore, what that means is we should be able to deliver assistance that gives people power in their hands to determine or be able to be a part of the determination of how they respond to the humanitarian situation they find themselves in.

In a humanitarian situation, people will need different kinds of things, and those all cannot be defined very well by humanitarian aid actors. Who are coming into those communities to support the recipients of aid.

Karen Peachey: But as Caroline points out, the need to listen, the need to engage and be more accountable, these are not new ideas.

Caroline Tetti: So people centered aid, if I may look back, there has been a lot of talk with different words to phrase the same same behavior or disposition in the delivery of aid. If you remember some time back, programming was hinged on what we call participatory design or participatory programming, which mainly was supposed to be bringing designs closer to the people.

Karen Peachey: So there's been lots of initiatives that should have brought greater participatory design and accountability. What's different now?

Caroline Tetti: People centered aid is pretty much, in my opinion, another way of doing this. Now, one thing that we can, as people who are working in the aid sector, ask ourselves, Are we genuinely sold to the idea of people centred aid?

Are we committed to making sure that the design, delivery, and monitoring plus impact of our programmes are actually people centred? Or are we just changing one word for another and starting from where we had left years back?

Karen Peachey: Caroline raises a sobering thought. Is the aid sector really committed to people centred aid? Or are we just repeating history? And how will we know the difference?

Caroline Tetti: The things that we prioritize are the things that will determine whether we are truly people centered or not. When you want to engage the community, there are resources that are involved in engaging communities. And those resources are both financial and time.

And if you look at the aid sector, those are the two things that we want to guard with our blood. We sit in boardrooms. We design programs, then we determine how long it will take us to deliver that design that we have built in our boardrooms. When we are discussing our programs with our donors, it's very unlikely that we are building in time and resources in our planning for listening to communities and building a community centered approach and design to our programs.

If we could just appreciate that we need to build in time and we need to build in money. To be able to engage communities, then we will be sincere about having people speak to us about what matters to them, how they perceive our programs, and how they think they can be part of the process of determining what would deliver the highest impact for our programs.

Karen Peachey: So for Caroline, an important starting point seems to be making sure we've put time and money into our budgets, to allow us the space to truly engage with affected communities. Not only this, she thinks it needs to be done early on, so that people have a real hand in shaping what the program will look like.

But at a time when budgets are being fiercely guarded, and aid spending around the world looks uncertain, there's a definite push to make sure that the aid resources are being spent efficiently. How can we make the argument for more money and time for community engagement? And then square the circle with efficiency.

Caroline Tetti: The focus on efficiency is a perspective that makes the assumption that communities cannot do anything for themselves. That is why we keep coming in with resources and solutions. And then we bundle the solutions on them and then monitor how our solution has worked for them. We talk about the scarcity of resources in boardrooms, but we never bring the challenges that we are facing in those boardrooms to the communities because we are assuming that they never know.

Think about it. If you give the communities an opportunity to speak about their situation, think about the local solutions that they could come up with. Think about how they could help you even to get better efficiency by letting you know where to target, who to target, when to target, what to do to get the highest impact, and what they could do themselves to help take the resources you're taking to their communities even further.

And I have seen this not in cash programs, but in normal community existence, growing up in a rural community. When you have scarce resources and you tell the community, we have challenges. And not so many of us have the resources that can help address those challenges. And what you'd find us do is we come and sit down and say, Hey, we want to go 10 steps. However, the resources we have look like they can only help us to go 4 steps. But how do we get to the 10 steps? Then you will find people coming with ideas of things that can be done that may not necessarily require money to help us get to step 6, step 8, or step 10.

Karen Peachey: As Caroline makes clear, these ideas aren't new.

The humanitarian system has been here many times before. Is there anything different this time around? Well, perhaps the growth of cash and voucher assistance could potentially change things a bit by removing some of the decision making power from aid organisations and moving it to the hands of people in crisis.

With that in mind, which action should be taken by humanitarian practitioners and policymakers to ensure a people centered approach when designing cash and voucher assistance?

Caroline Tetti: For us to be truly recipient centered or people centered, we have to understand that we are coming in with a position of power and that the people that we are representing or the people that we are serving are coming with less power.

And for them to be at the center of aid and the decisions affecting aid, we have to take very strategic and intentional decisions on giving them a voice, giving them dignity, and creating the spaces for those voices to be heard and their needs to be catered for in the design of our programs. We reached a point where we said, you know, we need to ask ourselves, are we doing what recipients actually want?

And in 2020, we started off Um, an initiative that was basically holding focus group discussions with communities that we are supporting and asking them about their choices and preferences. And this ranged from the time when they would have preferred to receive their cash, how they would want to, you know, make these choices, how much they would want to receive.

Recipients spoke about, you know, seasonality, um, education. The times when their children go to school, election periods, and how that affected the receipt of their transfers. And I think that for me is an opportunity to give recipients a true bargaining power and a voice in the design of the programs.

Karen Peachey: Caroline's approach is very similar to the improvements that Innocent talks about. As Caroline and Innocent make clear, people centered aid isn't just about talking to people about what they want once, and then building a program around it. Instead, it's a dynamic and ongoing process.

Innocent Tshilombo: People centered CVA, for me, it means involving the people throughout the project cycle.

As we are going through the project cycle, we involve them from assessment, design, implementation, and so on. Everything, even monitoring and feedback. And when you come back again, we need again to consider all the feedbacks that they shared previously. So at least we can incorporate it and also working with the local community is also very key because they know very well, they understand local dynamics and when you have local people on board. Then you have local knowledge also on board. And if you have something that you want to test, such as to see how it's working, you need to bring them, collect feedback from them, observe their behavior, and ask them questions. Ask them to reflect back and see what the changes. Ask them even about their vision.

Because for me, cash assistance should not be, uh, as any traditional humanitarian assistance. It should be something that will disrupt the humanitarian sector in a way that it will help people recover, not to stay in that cycle of receiving aid, but to recover and move toward developing their own communities with the cash.

I think a good community engagement and accountability program that is well implemented saves a lot of energy and bring efficiency to the organization and satisfaction to the people receiving assistance.

Karen Peachey: This is a point on which Caroline agrees strongly. She also argues that people centered aid needs to consider how people can meaningfully participate, given there's such an imbalance of power between them and the development of humanitarian organizations.

Caroline Tetti: When we come into development work, we are coming in at a position of power, at a position of advantage, as compared to those people who we are serving. People living in extreme poverty, people living in humanitarian or disaster situations, most of the time will be constrained in terms of how much they can be able to speak for themselves.

Or they can bargain for what can be done for them. And for us to do people centered aid, we must make sure that we empower people to have a voice on the table in the design of the programs, in the delivery of those programs, and in the monitoring of the programs. For us to be able to do that, we have to recognize their local knowledge.

We have to recognize that they are coming from a position of disempowerment or sometimes even a position of lack of knowledge, and we must be ready to take that slow movement to accommodate their learning process to catch up with us to understand what we are doing so that they can be able to process our

point of view and translate it into what they think can work for them in their communities.

Karen Peachey: Okay, so this is all clear at the level of the individual or small community, but of course humanitarian crises happen at large scale. Responding to such situations involves lots of organisations and agencies. How does people centered aid work when you think about it from this perspective? What does it mean for coordination?

Caroline Tetti: There is a need for better coordination. And that better coordination will give us an entry point into understanding these communities better. The actors in these types of spaces should be able to talk to each other, to define how to support these communities. And that might include how do we get data of people who are likely to be affected?

How do we understand the primary needs of these communities? When we went to Yemen, the very first thing we did was invested time in collecting information about what they already knew. And we made sure that whatever it is, the decisions that we were making about these communities was not just based on the paper design of our programs, but also knowledge that was already existing with the other partners.

As we started off the program, we made sure that we were linking back with the coordination mechanism to flow back knowledge that we were learning about our program and about these communities into the coordination mechanism to make this information available to partners. We did not create new structures.

We made sure, for example, that if a partner was already doing referral within the camp, that partner remained our go to person for referral of our recipients to delivering unconditional cash was going to give us new information. And that new information, we channeled it back to the partners to share with them both the good and the bad things that we were seeing in the community so that we could learn from them and also so they could learn from our experiences in the camps.

Karen Peachey: So from Caroline's description, we can see how dynamic people centered aid might be, how it's about continually involving and engaging affected community. And it sets out a blueprint for how different organizations can collaborate and work together by sharing knowledge, reducing duplication of services, and so on.

And from what we've heard so far, this would surely be a benefit to people who are receiving aid. But it's not just at the response level where things need to change. The voices of those most affected need to be heard at all levels of the humanitarian system. In June 2023, Innocent made sure that happened at a high level meeting focused on the future of cash assistance, where he made a passionate call for change.

He highlighted the need not only for this dynamism and dialogue, but also for speed. Here he reflects on the meeting.

Innocent Tshilombo: It's all about urgency because people depend on everything that we can do. And since you are talking about policy. Policy are the enablers. I mean, they enable the conditions, favorable conditions, for people to be able to move forward or move to the next step.

And, uh, in that meeting, it was an opportunity for me to remind everyone who participated that people lives depend on what we are currently deciding here. And whenever we are deciding, need to be fast tracked so that at least it can move as fast as possible to enable people who are dependent on whatever policy that we are defining to gain whatever they need.

And, uh, that was really very key, because it's not about waiting, it's not about keep discussing, but it's about acting. Acting now, because we need to do it fast. A policy should not be seen as a perfect document or a perfect tool, but should be seen as a tool for dialogue. And that dialogue should go through and forth.

You have your first draft, don't wait, just bring it to the people. They use it, they find issues, they give feedback, you go back again, you work on it, you bring it to them, and so on, and that's how we attend reforms.

Karen Peachey: After these reflections, we can conclude how much a people centered approach in CVA is needed to ensure that we meet the needs of people in crisis and contribute to breaking the cycle of aid dependency. Much work is still needed at the policy, design, and implementation levels, but it is possible to create mechanisms to include communities throughout the implementation cycle and pay attention to their insights, perspectives, and opinions. It is possible to design policies to enforce these approaches and put people's dignity and their needs at the core.

Next time on Cashcast, we will explore questions of accountability and engagement in more depth. If this is such an obvious need, why are we still falling behind in this area? Join us to explore this question and more through the

reflections of several guests. Let's continue the conversation. We want to hear from you.

Please share your thoughts with us through the channels indicated in the description of this episode. So until next time, goodbye.