

Listening to individual voices

by Siobhan Warrington and Anne-Sophie Lois

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Panos London and the Norwegian Refugee Council in Colombia have launched a project to tell the life stories of the more than three million Colombians who are internally displaced. A pilot project, it will be rolled out in other parts of the world.

Colombia has some of the most advanced national legislation on internal displacement in the world but fails to implement it effectively. In January 2004, the Constitutional Court declared the government's response to internal displacement to be in violation of the Constitution.¹ The government has allocated significant resources to IDPs but ongoing conflict makes it impossible to resolve the root causes of the displacement. The current Colombian

experiences and impacts of displacement. The stories and voices may be a valuable tool to balance official discourse around the conflict and its consequences. The life stories should serve to enable planners and policy makers to better appreciate the complex and varied impacts of internal displacement and identify more appropriate ways to respond to those affected.

The project has required significant investment of time and resources from facilitators and participants, yet it has a value beyond the tangible outcomes. IDMC recognises that the whole process of organising workshops and discussions and gathering life stories has a value in itself and is part of its investment in capacity building for civil society actors



Anne-Sophie Lois/IDMC

government claims to have improved the human rights situation since it came to power in 2002 by citing evidence of fewer displacements, massacres and homicides. The use of such indicators has been criticised by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and by Colombian government agencies and civil society. The Colombian government's reliance on quantitative data fails to account for the devastating social and mental consequences of the conflict for affected individuals.

The project aims to record and communicate the personal

and IDPs. Participants have learned practical skills related to eliciting oral testimony but have also explored values and attitudes, learning how to deal with the strong emotional aspect of the work. There has also been lots of discussion and sharing of experiences and the opportunity for participants to have input into the agenda of workshops and meetings and at times to take a lead role in facilitating certain sessions.

Training to record life stories

A workshop in April 2006 prepared participants to carry out life

story interviews with IDPs. It covered listening and questioning skills, interview relationships and ethics, topic development and recording equipment.

What makes a good interview?

- Preparation: knowing what you will be asking so you understand the answers.
- Introduction: providing the narrator with a clear explanation of why you are carrying out the interview and describing the nature and method of interviewing to the narrator.
- Credibility: the narrator should believe in what you are going to do.
- Technical preparation: make sure the tape recorder is ready and working.
- Agency: consider the narrator as actor or subject in the interview, not the object.
- Sensitivity
- Good listening skills
- Be respectful, non-critical and non-judgemental.
- Avoid leading questions: questions must invite the narrator to develop their story with trust and confidence.
- Use appropriate language: adjust language according to age and region.
- Appreciate the psychosocial aspects for both the interviewer and the narrator: when the narrator describes traumatic events, you need to be aware of your own fears.
- Guarantee security for the narrator: for example, change names and place names in the transcript.
- Consent: you need the narrator's permission to disseminate the information.

One of the participants, Andrea, working on the thematic analysis of the testimonies.

There was tremendous enthusiasm and commitment among participants to ensure outputs are widely promoted and have maximum impact. But, as anyone who has worked with life stories will appreciate, working with this rich

and detailed material is labour intensive. Turning around quality and meaningful outputs will take some time. At the moment there is a team of four reading and reviewing the testimonies with a view to making a selection of life stories and extracts for publication. A Colombian editor will be hired to produce a book, based on the interviews, for national and international audiences. IDMC

will work towards communicating the interviews via the IDMC website² for its key international audiences: the UN and humanitarian organisations, governments (refugee and asylum departments), the military, academics and researchers.

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1. See Manuel José Cepeda-Espinosa. 'How far may Colombia's Constitutional Court go to protect IDP rights?' FMR Special Issue, December 2006, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/BrookingsSpecial/full.pdf
2. www.internal-displacement.org