Listening to individual voices

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. 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 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 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 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.

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
Global welfare: dream or reality?

by John Mitchell and Hugo Slim

Jan Egeland, the former UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, has called for “a humanitarian system that is able to respond reliably, effectively and efficiently across the full range of emergencies ... humanitarian aid must be the responsibility of all nations for the benefit of all nations.”

Is the world on the verge of establishing a basic form of global welfare for all those affected by war and disaster? Or is the idea of fair and efficient global welfare a non-starter in a world of competing political powers, massive vested interests and imminent environmental crisis when group survival, not altruism, may become the norm?

How are we doing on reforming the politics and practice of humanitarian action? Nobody really knows for sure but an important indication is provided by evaluative material produced by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance. ALNAP is a membership organisation made up of UN, Red Cross/Crescent, government and NGOs, academic institutions and consultants and for the past five years ALNAP has reviewed a sample of agency evaluations in order to gauge the progress of humanitarian action.¹

Our latest Review of Humanitarian Action (RHA)² takes a step back and reviews progress since 2001. The RHA findings suggest that global welfare is still some way off.

Despite its extraordinary global reach, the formal humanitarian system is, essentially, the combined effort of about 20 western states which pay for and provide the agencies for most of the world’s humanitarian action. This is not a broadly-based international endeavour with buy-in from a majority of states. It is a western niche. Two of the five permanent members of the Security Council – Russia and China – are suspicious of the western system and prefer to do their own thing, or nothing, in war and disaster. The major Islamic states and charitable institutions prefer to work bilaterally and partially, mainly in particular Muslim settings. Local and informal systems – remittance flows and local civil society institutions – can be extremely important but are often overlooked by the western system.

Although it gets a lot of profile and works with the authority of the UN, the formal western-driven system can be a very blunt, selective and insensitive instrument. It has deep preferences for focusing on strategic wars and can be hugely skewed by populist passions – hence the massive inequality of response between suffering in the tsunami and war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The system has no objective humanitarian measure of need and priority. Thus, the politics of the system remain deeply problematic.

So, too does agency practice. While there are many separate initiatives to try and make it perform better on the ground, there are still deep problems of good practice. Some sectors, like food aid, are over-subscribed while others, like shelter, water, camp management and protection, remain under-resourced or insufficiently understood. Complex cross-cutting areas like livelihoods are more evaluations of humanitarian work than ever before but they are seldom well used. Either they are done ritually for donor accountability purposes or they are not user-friendly. Most do not employ an inspirational learning process as they go, nor are they designed to have their findings taken up by the key target groups who could bring about real change.

Nor are the system and its many agencies a good learner. Today, there are more evaluations of humanitarian work than ever before but they are seldom well used. Either they are done ritually for donor accountability purposes or they are not user-friendly. Most do not employ an inspirational learning process as they go, nor are they designed to have their findings taken up by the key target groups who could bring about real change.

So, there are still real challenges. But there are also massive opportunities. The formal and informal systems are bigger and more self-aware than ever before. The ideal of eventual global welfare is an important long-term aim and could be voiced more explicitly by a range of social movements.

². www.internal-displacement.org