Thinking ahead: displacement, transition, solutions

Telling it like it is

Tammi Sharpe and Elias Schneider

Oral histories provide a means to productively include forcibly displaced people, through their voices, in the work and practices of those looking for solutions for displacement crises.

A central element in the search to better understand and find durable solutions for displacement – and one that regularly eludes us – is how those directly affected by displacement can best contribute towards this process. Often lost in the search for solutions are the voices of those who faced discrimination, have been marginalised and denied basic rights, and have experienced displacement first-hand. They have perspectives on their plight and on the roots and drivers of the conflict and they also hold views on what is needed to heal and rebuild the torn fabric of their community.

Oral histories collect memories, personal commentaries and data garnered through interviews with participants in, or observers of, significant events or times. Oral history interviewing is “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events”.¹ Open-ended questions are posed to the interviewee who therefore retains control of the interview. The practice of building oral histories is not new and is relatively common in many social contexts; it has been used, for example, in Australian resettlement programmes to better understand newly arrived refugees from South Sudan.² In such contexts there has to be a mutual, clear understanding between interviewer and interviewee that participation in the project will not yield any physical or asylum- or protection-related benefits.

In the past, the recordings of refugees’ stories has been limited to either a technical determination of refugee status – generally of a confidential nature and limited in their use – or isolated glimpses into individual testimonies that were suitable for advocacy purposes. Especially in a refugee camp context, and following successful repatriation or resettlement, current and former refugees could be interviewed to allow them to share their insights, experiences and views for finding solutions. In the future the interviews would not only add to the historical record of the crisis but could also inform reintegration, stabilisation, peace-building, transitional justice and reconciliation strategies. The interview on its own can also have a healing impact.

Such stories can be a powerful tool for necessary political change. The author of the blog Humans of New York³, which regularly features individual anecdotes or life stories of the city’s inhabitants, travelled along the Balkan route and recorded testimonies from Syrian, Afghan and many other refugees. These accounts generated widespread support and sympathy for the plight of these persons.

A side-event to the 2015 High Commissioner’s Dialogue for Protection yielded insights as to what kind of a role oral histories could play in volatile contexts where the work of humanitarians is dominated by curfews and securitised compounds that tend to separate aid workers from the very populations they aim to help. In such instances, oral histories would serve as a valuable tool to circumvent security constraints and bring about a better understanding of the fears, hopes and incentives of affected populations. This would in turn enhance programme and policy development by providing first-hand insights for human rights activists, peace mediators and state officials.

Oral histories could be relevant for the future of countries at war and thus the solutions for their displaced. In Syria, for example, prior to the war the different communities co-existed in peace. The memory of this is increasingly overshadowed in the context of the unfolding of the conflict and biased narratives being crafted to serve political agendas. Similar challenges face other war-torn countries such as the Central African Republic or South Sudan. Recording such individual experiences and histories will
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allow for a more comprehensive historical record of the conflict. Such a record will help to mend the torn social fabric of the country and thereby help to lay the foundation for a renewed peaceful coexistence. Such stories would be of value to peace actors, researchers and transitional justice actors to enable a better understanding of the roots of conflict in the search for lasting solutions.

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1. Taken from the definition of the Oral History Association www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/
3. www.humansofnewyork.com/

Somalia-Yemen links: refugees and returnees

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The strategies of Yemeni refugees in Somalia are extensively based on the social networks and cultural linkages that exist between the Horn of Africa and Yemen. Meanwhile, Somali refugees returning from Yemen need to find safer areas within Somalia.

Many of the hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees to whom Yemen offered prima facie refugee status over the decades are having to return as a result of the fighting in Yemen. Meanwhile, uprooted Yemeni populations have been crossing the Gulf of Aden in ever greater numbers in hope of finding refuge and protection in Somalia and other states in the Horn of Africa.

It is at reception centres that Yemeni refugees and Somali returnees meet their first challenge – if they survive the perilous sea journey. As part of the registration process, refugees are required to produce documents that prove either Yemeni nationality or, in the case of returning Somali refugees, refugee status in Yemen. These centres – such as in the port cities of Berbera and Bossasso – are set up under the auspices of the regional Somali governments of Somaliland and Puntland to register refugees and returning Somalis. They are intended only to provide arriving refugees with emergency assistance like food and shelter, and as such are not equipped to make provision for the long-term settlement of the refugees or the returnees.

Somali returnees

Somaliland, Puntland and the Federal Government in Mogadishu have all expressed willingness to take back their returning refugees. However, such rhetoric is problematic. The governments seem to advocate assisting returnees to go back to their regions of origin soon after their arrival, regardless of whether the factors triggering their displacement still exist there. Each of the administrations have thus far been reluctant to put in place overarching policies and frameworks that can ensure the safety of returnees by supporting their relocation to safer regions. Each of the political administrations is unable (and in some instances unwilling) to protect and integrate Somalis who are faced with the abrupt transition from being refugees in Yemen to being returnees.

Yemenis’ strategies

In the context of Yemenis displaced to Somalia, UNHCR’s encampment approach is being challenged by refugees. Many refugees have come to believe that registration and encampment will render them helpless in making important decisions like where to live and when to return home.

Because of the long history of contact, Yemeni refugees consider Somalia to be culturally familiar, despite the linguistic differences; this helps to instil confidence in their ability to navigate the challenges of urban life there. There is a trend of Yemeni refugees preferring to ‘self-settle’ in the capital cities of Hargeisa and Mogadishu,