

Telling it like it is

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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 York*³, 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/

2. McKirdy C (2015) *Practicing Oral History with Immigrant Narrators*, Left Coast Press

3. www.humansofnewyork.com/

