

illuminating Voices

Oral testimonies :

vivid, personal accounts that draw on a person's direct memories and experiences.

They challenge the generalisations of development literature, increase our understanding of development issues, and enlighten planners and policymakers about how it feels to be at the sharp end of development. **Oral testimony** does not rely on consensus; rather it celebrates the - at times - awkward differences and contradictions between individuals.

We train and support local organisations to record and disseminate the views and experiences of those usually excluded from international development debates. The communities we work with are often marginalised by illiteracy, poverty, gender, disability, caste, religion or ethnic identity.

The testimonies are the result of open-ended interviews around a series of topics. Interviewers do not use formal questionnaires; narrators are encouraged to reflect upon the events they describe, and to give their views and opinions. By training local people interviewing can be done in local languages, in relaxed settings, and between people who share aspects of each other's backgrounds.

Panos London

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9 White Lion Street

London N1 9PD

United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7278 1111

info@panos.org.uk

How is it different?

The use of participatory communication tools is widespread, and there is an increasing use of 'voices' in the communication of development issues. Our oral testimony methodology is unique in combining the following principles:

- Taking a locally-rooted capacity-building approach
- Producing high quality materials
- Adopting methods and principles from oral history, notably ethics, documentation and archiving
- Focusing on the individual

IDP Voices : <http://www.idpvoices.org/>

This site lets internally displaced people tell their life stories – in their own words. The narratives in these pages are valuable complements to the official information on conflicts which governments and international organisations offer.

The life stories capture personal accounts and insights into the real effects of displacement on the lives of individuals. The narrators share their experiences, feelings, hopes and dreams, and the impact of being forced from their homes.

<http://www.idpvoices.org/>

Mountain Voices : <http://www.mountainvoices.org/>

This website presents interviews with over 300 people who live in mountain and highland regions round the world. Their testimonies offer a personal perspective on change and development.

<http://www.mountainvoices.org/>

Our values

Inclusive

- We believe that embracing the views of poor and marginalised people is essential for sustainable and effective development.
- Taking part in dialogue and debate contributes to a healthy and vibrant society.

Empowering

- We believe that poor and marginalised people should drive and shape the changes needed to improve their lives.
- We enable people to share information and ideas, speak out and be heard.

Balanced

- We believe people need accessible information reflecting a wide range of views.
- This allows them to make informed choices about crucial issues that have an impact on their lives.

Diverse

- We respect different views, value local knowledge and encourage a range of approaches in our work worldwide.
- We believe that freedom of information and media diversity are essential for development.

Illuminating

- We shed light on ignored, misrepresented or misunderstood development issues.
- We believe that the views of poor and marginalised people give greater insight into their lives and offer unique perspectives on the challenges they face.

the use of local interviewers

Panos' innovative Oral Testimony activities were developed in order to amplify the voices of the poor and the marginalised. It is acknowledged that much development activity has failed to meet the needs and aspirations of the most disadvantaged - yet these "*experts*" in the realities of inequality have had little opportunity to influence development policy and practice. Thus Panos works not with professional researchers, but trains local people in the methodology, so that interviewing is done in local languages, in relaxed settings, between people who share some, but not necessarily all aspects of the each other's backgrounds.

The emphasis is on openness and willingness to learn and there is a basic assumption that the process of listening, as well as narrating, is of benefit. Becoming an interviewer has been for many participants as novel and valuable an experience as being a narrator. Often a conscious choice has been made to include people in the interview training whose access to education has been limited, and who would not normally have the chance to become involved in this kind of collaborative research or information gathering.

At its best this approach produces extremely vivid material, and an excellent relationship between narrator and interviewer. However, not all interviewers prove ideally suited to the task, and you will experience the frustration of reading some interviews where good leads are ignored, or in which the interviewer focuses on his/her own interests and doesn't allow the narrator to develop their own story and perspective. However, when this "*capacity-building*" process works, there is a greater sense of ownership by those involved, and many partners have gone on to start new testimony projects, or expand upon the original activities.

Testimonies are tape-recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. Partners work with local language tapes and transcripts; Panos with English versions, most of which are translated locally, sometimes by the interviewers. The emphasis is on word for word transcription and translation; questions are included. Each interview has been summarised, to give you some idea of the narrator, the content and key themes or concerns.

the value of oral testimony

Oral testimonies are the result of free-ranging interviews around a series of topics, drawing on direct personal memory and experience. Good testimonies are full of human detail, individual experience and personal opinion. Interviewers do not use formal questionnaires, and narrators are encouraged to reflect upon the events they describe, and to give their views and opinions. The narratives which result are subjective, anecdotal, selective, partial and individual. But what some might call a "*weakness*" in the evidence is in fact a resource, for the way that people remember or describe something tells us what is important about it to them. **Oral testimonies** offer clues as to how people interpret events and - especially valuable in the context of development - what their priorities and values are. Ultimately, they tell us less about the fine detail of events and experience than about their meaning for people. And they highlight the complexity and variety of experience within any "*community*".

Oral testimony collection does not replace more formal or quantitative research, but it complements and illuminates it. Such qualitative material cannot give a complete or fully "*representative*" account of a community's views or experience (unless a project was undertaken on a massive scale), but it is illustrative, vivid, often challenging, and breathes life into more precise statistics. Projects are based on the view that perceptions are just as important as facts in understanding development decisions and priorities. Oral testimony collection provides a way to gain understanding of those perceptions and their influence on people's thinking. Thus a good oral testimony records not just events and practices, but provides clues as to their meaning and significance for people. We hope readers of these interviews will gain insight, not just information.

So do not explore this site if you want only to uncover facts, figures and irrefutable truths; do embark on it if you want to gain greater understanding of what people believe to be important and "true", and why.

Mission statement

Panos London stimulates informed and inclusive public debate around key development issues in order to foster sustainable development. We are working to promote an enabling media and communications environment worldwide.

Our aim is to ensure that the perspectives of the people whose lives are most affected by development (mainly the poor and marginalised) are included within decision-making and that decisions are subject to their scrutiny and debate.

Our priority issues are : HIV and AIDS, environment, conflict, trade policy, poverty reduction, and the information society. We see gender as integral to all these.

We believe that :

- Freedom of information and media pluralism are essential attributes of sustainable development.
- Information is central to change. People need access to understandable, unbiased information in order to take informed action.
- Those most affected by change should be enabled to drive and shape that change.
- The process through which we work is as important as the outcomes and outputs.
- We believe in a more equitable world, and oppose all forms of discrimination.

Living with poverty

"My wish is that [my children] may never face those problems which I faced in my life"
Salma, Pakistan

These testimonies from **Kenya, Mozambique, Pakistan** and **Zambia** are a powerful reminder of the human indignities that lie at the heart of poverty and why effective approaches to poverty reduction matter. The stories bring to life the reality of poverty and its daily oppressions.

Survival strategies

"What besets our land is that lack of forest. We just have wide open land that brings strong winds, and holds back the rains." Vola, Madagascar

In southern **Madagascar** environmental change is pushing the poor even closer to the margins of survival. Two indigenous communities share the experience of this environment through their own films and life stories, providing an insight into the realities of rural poverty and the coping strategies they have developed.

Desert voices

"There is no resemblance between now and before 1984... and there is no improvement between today and yesterday" Ismail, Sudan

Perhaps nowhere in the world are the impacts of desertification more challenging than in **Africa**. These accounts highlight its wide-ranging consequences, from migration for work and conflict over resources, to changes in traditions and women's roles.

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<http://www.panos.org.uk/oraltestimony>

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