

Method 8: Testimonies

Purpose

Testimony is “first hand (usually oral) declaration and/or authentication of a fact.”

Emotionally gripping real-life stories are frequently used in PPA reports to powerfully document and illustrate the nature and practical consequences of poverty dynamics.

These extremely useful stories:

- Help policymakers understand and connect with the human side of an experience (e.g. we may know what a drought is and what it does to crops, etc. But do we really understand what the range of consequences may be for those living through it?)
- Mobilise policymakers to act by showing the connection between “ideas on paper” and people’s suffering

Process

Usually, the person giving testimony on a particular subject will have been identified by something they said during a Discussion Group or other Activity.

The most effective testimonies explain very specific circumstances and their consequences. Therefore, the interviewer must begin by being very clear in his or her mind about exactly what information is being sought.

Testimonies should include people’s names (unless they are sharing sensitive information), age, gender, etc. and as many details as possible to help us understand their story. Thus, if a particular story is about drought, it needs to tell us how often drought strikes, how seriously and all the different ways in which it has affected the person giving testimony. The interviewer should ask probing questions and listen closely.

Helpful testimonies could be gathered for the 2002/3 PPA about:

- How chronic illness (e.g. HIV/AIDS) has impoverished a household
- The experience of health officials responsible for confronting HIV/AIDS
- How the death of a husband has impoverished a household
- How poor governance (e.g. corruption or abusive taxation) has contributed to the impoverishment of a household
- Why people engage in “illegal” or “hazardous” livelihoods
- People’s experience receiving Government relief assistance, etc.
- The experience of a child labourer
- The concerns of unemployed and/or landless youth
- How people have been affected by cash-crop price fluctuations
- The relationship between ageing and impoverishment
- The relationship between polygamy and susceptibility to poverty
- The relationship between environmental degradation and impoverishment
- The relationship between insecure land tenure and risk of impoverishment

In fact, any circumstance that an elite, urban-based policymaker might not understand *or doubt* would benefit from a “testimony.”

Note: When gathering testimonies, it is particularly important to capture precise quotes. These make the testimony’s “authenticity” much more evident.

For example, the Uganda PPA captured an important testimony about people fleeing their fields to avoid being imprisoned for failure to pay taxes. Policymakers were sceptical. Nonetheless, they couldn’t argue with a solid testimony full of compelling quotes!