CHAPTER ONE

WORDS FROM THE HEART
The power of oral testimony

Words from the heart are more alive than your scribblings. When we speak, our words burn [1].

There has always been a special power in direct speech. The raw recounting of experience has an authenticity and persuasiveness which it is hard to match, and most of us would rather hear someone speak directly than read about them through another's words. Even on the printed page, passages of speech tend to attract our attention: first-person testimony is simply more engaging than impersonal commentary or interpretation.

The spoken word cuts across barriers of wealth, class and race. It is as much the prerogative of ordinary people as of those in positions of power and authority. It requires neither formal education, nor the ability to read and write, nor fluency in any national or official language. Most importantly, it gives voice to the experience of those people whose views are often overlooked or discounted. The significance of this cannot be overestimated. To ignore these voices is to ignore a formidable body of evidence and information.

This book explores ways of listening to the voice and experience of ordinary people. In so doing, it seeks to outline a variety of methods through which those involved in development—from policy makers to project workers—can gain a better understanding of the concerns and priorities, culture and experiences of the people with whom they wish to work. Above all, oral testimony can give those communities more power to set their own agenda for development.

Since much of the book concentrates on the issues which arise from the collection, interpretation and preservation of oral
testimony, it is vital to consider how project workers can transmit what they hear and apply what they learn. Without a thorough understanding of the issues involved in this process, listening to people and recording their words can too easily become a purely archival or voyeuristic pursuit, or an exercise in knowledge extraction.

**Acting on listening**

The role of listener comes with certain obligations. A reciprocal exchange is required in which what is heard is both given back and carried forward. People’s testimony must be treated with respect. The origins and ownership of the spoken word should always be honoured, either by recognising authorship or by guaranteeing anonymity.

By applying what is heard in partnership with those who voice it, collecting and communicating oral testimony can become a cooperative exercise in social action. The implications are exciting and far-reaching. It can lead to a critique of development policies, or to improved strategies for responding to famine and refugee crises. It can give rise to a more relevant schools or training curriculum, the evaluation and adaptation of traditional agricultural practices or the mounting of a land rights campaign. It can encourage a more effective response to the particular circumstances of women or improved health care for children or the elderly. Whatever the outcome, it is important that the process of listening does eventually result in acknowledgement and action, and that those who have given up their time to talk, know that their words have been taken seriously. This notion of “applied” oral testimony is what gives the listening process a particular relevance to development and differentiates it from a purely academic study.

**Making development accountable**

At the heart of this principle of applied oral testimony is a challenge to the development establishment. The inclusion of direct testimony in the development debate can help to make it less of a monologue and more of a dialogue, as people’s testimony begins to require answers and as their voices force the development establishment to be more accountable for their actions. In short, it is not enough for the development “expert”
to summarise and interpret the views of others—the “others” must be allowed to speak for themselves.

“Accountability” and “transparency” may well be the buzz words of development into the next decade. Bringing the voice and experience of poor people to bear on development issues will, however, be the acid test for whether these words achieve anything more than “buzz” status. A wide variety of development agencies from the World Bank to small non-government organisations (NGOs) are making increasing efforts to canvass the views and opinions of people in areas where they intervene. Such feedback undoubtedly highlights the immense difficulties and complexities inherent in creating sustainable patterns of development. But if these voices are ignored, then much development will continue by default to support or create further inequalities.

The concept of “listening to the people” is by no means new to the development establishment. Participation and consultation have been at the heart of most of what has been considered progressive and effective in the field to date. Similarly, the attempt to be heard is not a new one on the part of the so-called beneficiaries of aid. Over the past three decades of development, they have tried in many ways to raise their voice above the clamour of debate that has raged around them. All too often, however, planners and policy makers hear only what they want to, and adopt methods of listening which ignore the more challenging or awkward views and testimonies. And even if people’s attempts to talk and to listen are successful at field level, donors, governments and policy makers still have to be convinced. Without the political will to take account of the results of such an exchange, people will be poorly rewarded for giving others the benefit of their time and thoughts.

A voice in the development debate

Speaking out is an act of power, and the act of listening demands respect for the speaker. But listening is also an art, based on certain fundamental principles which are also at the heart of any notion of just and cooperative development. Interviewing is not just a practical mechanism for gathering information. It needs the human skills of patience, humility,
willingness to learn from others and to respect views and values which you may not share. As a listener, your sources are not dead documents or statistics, but living people and you have to be able to work together.

Hidden voices

One of the reasons why poor communities are so seldom heard is because of the documentary bias—the bias of the written word—which exists at all the key stages of development planning, implementation and evaluation. People are not consulted enough because the main debates take place in documents which they do not write, or in meetings which they do not attend.

Bringing together what people say and think in the form of oral testimony, and then communicating those testimonies, is one way of correcting a bias which runs through the whole development debate and dictates the majority of development initiatives. It is a way of giving volume and power to the voices of people who are outside the development establishment and of ensuring that they are heard.

If being poor means having less of a voice, then being the poorest of the poor means being the most silent of all. Even

Eritrean widow and refugee Hawa Filli (right) shows the interviewer a photograph of her husband as she recounts her life story.
within the ranks of the disadvantaged, there are individuals and groups who—if they are remembered at all—tend to be “spoken for” and often misrepresented. The collective voice of any community tends towards generalisations, simplifications or half-truths and is dominated by the loudest voices. Like the official document, the community view will tend to concentrate on the concerns of the wealthy, the political elite, and social and religious leaders.

Listening to individual testimonies acts as a counterpoint to generalisations and provides important touchstones against which to review the collective version. It gives development workers access to the views and experience of more marginalised groups, such as the elderly, women, ethnic minorities, the disabled and children. Bringing in these hidden voices allows a much more subtle appreciation of the divisions and alliances within societies.

Sometimes the hidden voices are the most important of all. In many societies, it has been common for men to take the dominant role in public life, but for women to be the anchors of the household and farm economy. Yet there is an equally widespread prejudice which tends to reduce what women speak about to the realm of “gossip”, while the same bias elevates men’s talk to the status of serious and constructive discussion. Indeed, there are important differences in patterns of talking and listening which affect not only the way in which men and women talk, but also the times and places in which it is socially acceptable for them to speak. Men may speak out in public places, in front of people and in the centre of the town or village. Women tend to talk together “backstage”—in private places, in the home or at communal places of work. For men, talking is often a legitimate and valued activity in itself—a mark of stature and a social responsibility. For women, talking is rarely something they can make time to do for its own sake, but is more often an activity to be carried out alongside others—while working, cooking, or looking after children.

Thus in many communities, men’s social responsibility as the official communicators permits them to step forward and “speak for the team”, as American socio-linguist Deborah Tannen has pointed out [2]. This often involves them in speaking for women about things that they, as men, may know very little about, such as childrearing, health care, women’s
roles in agriculture and marketing, fuel and water collection. Men may also speak for women when it is religiously or culturally unacceptable for women to talk to men or strangers.

This gender imbalance between public and private talk means that in most societies men's voices are heard over and above women's, and it makes the role of oral testimony collection even more important as a way of redressing that balance. The relative silence of women in many societies means that listening to them should be a priority. Special attention should be paid to women's oral artistry, which manifests itself most powerfully in working songs, stories and proverbs. Such artistry is particularly resonant of the reality of women's lives, a reality which can never truly be depicted, and is more likely to be distorted, when described by men. In this context—and in all attempts to listen to the hidden voices of society—the words of the American feminist Dale Spender are relevant: “Reality is constructed and sustained primarily by those who talk...those who control the talk are also those who are able to control reality [3].”
At community level, therefore, the testimony of individual voices reveals the experience of hidden groups, and counters the bias of those who speak for or ignore them. It has the capacity to break down generalisations and misinformation about communities, their economies, needs, power structures, social organisation and goals. While this may complicate the design of relief and development projects, it may ultimately make them more equitable and effective.

**Hidden spheres**

In the same way that oral testimony can give voice to hidden groups, it also provides the opportunity to describe hidden spheres of experience, particularly aspects of private and cultural life which might be missed out in a routine development analysis. Economic factors do not exist in a vacuum. Social relationships reflect and influence economic and political ones, and an improved understanding of the former can shed light on the latter. The various forms of oral testimony give people the chance to voice their experience of family and work relationships, of friendship, love, sexuality, childbirth, parenting and leisure, culture and religion. These aspects of life, which are central to anyone’s understanding of his or her world, are often overlooked in project feasibility studies, which tend to take a mechanistic view of communities, their needs and possible solutions. Yet people are more likely to take part in something they value and believe in, and are more willing to invest their time and resources in what is feasible within their current social obligations.

**Hidden connections**

Individuals’ own accounts of their life and experience usually paint a much fuller picture than most development planners and project workers look for. Above all, personal testimonies connect the various spheres of life, such as family and work, or health and income, which professionals tend to separate. Relief and development planning is often affected by a kind of inter-sectoral blindness, the myopia of the specialist. The various technical disciplines or professions of development workers mean that they often tackle community development in sectors: health, agriculture, economics, nutrition, law, psychology and
so on. People’s first-hand accounts of their life and experience tend to flow to and fro between sectors, and to stress the connections rather than the differences. All aspects of a life are intertwined, but it often takes direct communication, rather than a completed survey form, to remind specialists of this fact.

Such testimony obliges development workers to think across sectors and take an inter-disciplinary approach. As people’s experiences of famine testify, food aid is not the clear-cut solution to starvation that it seems. Survival is about much more than material relief (see p30). As women’s voices have made clear, the need for supplies of clean water is not just about health, it is about time and labour, distance and power. Personal testimonies about HIV infection and AIDS reveal that the issue is not just medical, and the consequences are not confined to illness, death and grief, but include far wider social and economic costs.

**Cooperation, confidence and consciousness**

The process of talking and listening is potentially an extremely cooperative and participatory one. If it is going well, people are involved, in the fullest sense, in the narration of their experience and the analysis of their situation. Moreover, the collection, interpretation and presentation of oral testimony can become a genuinely communal venture. In addition to the primary role of narrators, people may also become involved as interviewers, or as interpreters of information, or in the presentation and transmission of their own or others’ words through publications, radio, theatre or exhibitions. The collection of oral testimony is a process that can involve a whole community.

Speaking up is a sign of confidence; being listened to increases that confidence. In many projects where people have come together to voice their ideas and experience, an increased sense of community and of social consciousness has emerged. Voicing something begins to make it concrete and therefore more possible. It also starts a process of sharing, and this pooling of experience can in turn generate or strengthen a sense of social cohesion.

The process can be not only therapeutic, but also assertive. People who begin to voice their personal or group experience,
can begin to understand it and to act on it. This sense of the spoken word marking the beginning of things is fundamental to many cultures where naming things is often a way of creating them in mythical and religious thought. Equally, on a purely individual and psychological level, speaking about a certain situation is often the first step towards addressing it.

For a group of Guatemalan refugee women in Mexico, narrating their life stories to one another and speaking out about the problems of their isolation was the beginning of a broader mental health programme which eventually supported a wide network of refugee families. In Egypt, a group of migrant women coming to terms with their new life in Cairo's City of the Dead found their regular storytelling sessions, based on their personal histories, played a crucial part in sustaining practical bonds of friendship and support between them and their families [4]. The case study of urban Brazilian communities in Chapter Five illustrates how such a process can mobilise a whole community in a struggle for rights and recognition.

**Equal idioms**

A central part of any attempt at listening is a commitment to accept the idiom of the people who are talking. This automatically contributes to a more equal relationship. Too often the poor and powerless are further disadvantaged by having to conform to the language and communication methods of those who hold power. Oral testimony reverses this trend. Ideally, it should take place in the speaker's mother tongue and interviewers should respect traditional ways of communicating, instead of imposing “vertical” systems, such as questionnaires and surveys, or insisting on use of the official language. In this way the collection of oral testimony shifts the burden of translation and understanding back to the listener, and begins to balance the scales in the communication process. It gives people the opportunity to express themselves in their own terms, employing their language, relating their history, their stories, traditions, songs, theatre and all that goes to make up the repertoire with which individuals communicate among themselves and with others.

Listening to people’s oral testimony involves accepting this
kind of "horizontal" communication, and then finding ways of preserving, translating and communicating it onwards to a wider and different audience. The latter process has its risks and pitfalls, but it is at least more equitable than any top-down or non-consultative approach.

Moreover, the process of listening reverses the roles of expert and pupil which have become all too typical of relations between development worker and so-called beneficiary. In collecting oral testimony, the interviewer sits at the feet of people who are obviously the experts on their own life and experience. This role reversal, and the process of listening, can generate greater mutual respect and a more equal and collaborative relationship. SOS Sahel, a development organisation which ran the three-year Sahel Oral History Project (see p126), found that:

*Not the least of the benefits of employing oral history methods in a development context is the impact on project workers, nearly all of whom have acquired valuable new insights...[and have identified the value] of taking the time to learn, through interviews, as much as possible from individual life stories and reflections [5].*

Development is not an exact science: to date it has been riddled with misunderstandings, failed experiments and discarded theories. But it is increasingly recognised that one of the most damaging aspects of the aid industry has been the tendency of donors to impose their own theories of what constitutes development on the recipients. This book aims to identify some useful ways in which the voices of ordinary people may "burn" more brightly, so that it is their priorities and concerns which inform the development debate.