

Narrative, Description, and Storytelling as Tools for Policy Advising

1. Introduction and problem definition:

Frequently overlooked, the method of description can be an essential way to quickly and effectively connect policymakers with global post-conflict situations that are inherently distant from them. Researchers are the bridge, providing policymakers with information and perspective they might not otherwise access. Our deep cultural, linguistic, geographic, social, and historical knowledge of our “subjects” is an asset to policymaking.

As a specialist on transitional justice in post-genocide Rwanda, by simply closing my eyes, I can be transported to the busy streets of Kigali city, or to a local genocide memorial site tucked along the Rwandan-DRC border. I can distinctly access the familiar sights, sounds, and smells, each providing emotional context and intellectual depth—the smoky smell of charcoal burning in the moist evening air as families finish cooking, the laughter when celebrating a birth or wedding, heads bowed before a meal, while an elder whispers soft Kinyarwanda words thanking “*imana, data wacu,*” the Lord, our Father, blessing the special day. I can also hear cries, loud wails, and pleading, familiar sounds heard during genocide commemoration ceremonies every April. I can also feel cold tears on my cheek when comforting a colleague whose 4-year-old nephew died unexpectedly because his family lived too far from a hospital.

Descriptive work is fundamental in providing context and communicating complexities and competing interests of multiple stakeholders living in post-conflict societies. If policymakers are unable to relate to the full range of challenges and contradictions of such core issues, they might base policy decisions off of incomplete or inaccurate information, resulting in insufficient

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Descriptive Research Workshop Memo

October 28-29, 2022

policies and interventions. Of more concern, some policies can cause further harm by marginalizing groups who might have been left out due to lack of information depicting post-conflict life. Through description, researchers who advise policymakers can paint a deep, comprehensive, and vibrant picture that represents different aspects of the problems to be addressed.

2. Key Points:

Expressing urgency, emotion, and human impact through description has the potential to change policymakers' immediate relationships to pressing issues of post-conflict rebuilding and conflict prevention. For a U.S.-based senior statesman, analyst, or government leader, description enlivens the stories behind policy reports that rely heavily on statistics and numbers. Reading this sentence in a brief, "Since the Lord's Resistance Army first emerged in the 1980s, the group's violence has displaced an estimated 2.5 million people within and across borders in central Africa"¹ is starkly different than encountering the situation of each of those 2.5 million individuals.

Practically, it is nearly impossible to collect and describe each person's story of the 2.5 million affected by this conflict. Furthermore, several studies show that the human brain struggles to conceptualize and relate to the magnitude of a number like 2.5 million people. To address these issues, researchers, as educators and advisors, can employ other means to communicate the

¹ "LRA-Related Displacement in Central Africa: An End to the Emergency, but not to IDPS' Needs." *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council*. September 2013. Accessed on 10/21/2022. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/lra-related-displacement-in-central-africa-an-end-to-the-emergency-but-not-to-idps#:~:text=Since%20the%20Lord's%20Resistance%20Army,across%20borders%20in%20central%20Africa.>

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urgency, complexities, and unique challenges that are not easily imaginable when reporting numbers. Description is one of these alternative means.

In 1998, the small rural community of Whitwell, Tennessee decided to collect six million paper clips – one to represent each person who perished during the Holocaust. The project was a response to high school students who, like most individuals, struggled to grasp the concept and enormity of the six million Jews who died under Nazi persecution. Segments of these six million paper clips were displayed in public areas and communities throughout the U.S. They provided tangible context to the magnitude of human suffering and loss of six million Jews and eleven million victims.²

When advising the former U.S. Ambassador to Rwanda from 2018-2021, I similarly relied on description to provide context for community perspectives of contested topics of post-genocide justice. Descriptions helped me explain the fear, concern, and resignation Rwandans shared when they heard that individuals convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) were eligible for early release.³ UN policy impacted many Rwandans on a personal level. “What if they return and insight more violence? Can we ever escape our victimhood?” In Rwandan culture and society, individuals could not express such sentiments to an ambassador or senior government official. As an interlocutor, I relied on description to fill in these gaps for the Ambassador.

² “Paper Clips Project.” Accessed 10/21/2022. <https://oneclipatatime.org/paper-clips-project/>

³ B. Hola, “Early Release of ICTR Convicts: The Practice Beyond the Outrage,” July 5, 2019. JusticeInfo.net, Accessed 10/21/2022. <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/tribunals/ict/41861-early-release-of-ict-convicts-the-practice-beyond-the-outrage.html>

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3. Preliminary Conclusions:

U.S. government officials and policymakers often lack necessary time, language skills, and local contacts to fully imagine and understand how policies impact people on the ground. Additionally, as policymakers spend more time in Washington or other headquarters cities, they might become further disconnected from communities where policy is being implemented. As such, description is an essential part of effectively briefing and advising policymakers. Researchers are in a unique position to communicate contextual information via a range of descriptive modalities- discourse, narrative, sounds, smells, sights, conversations, and expressions, among others. Central to the effectiveness of advising is being able to describe not only what people say about the policies, but also describe things that are unspoken or intangible, and that would otherwise be unnoticed or unknown to a policymaker who is not familiar with the context. Description is therefore a means to connect research and policy.