

The Quipu project: Participatory story-telling can help rebuild community in post-authoritarian societies

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About the research

In the 1990s, the Peruvian government introduced a National Population Programme that promised to provide all Peruvian women with modern reproductive healthcare and birth control. However the programme required health workers to meet target numbers of sterilisations, which, combined with historical patterns of marginalisation of indigenous communities, led to many people being sterilised without the opportunity to give their full and informed consent. Many of the 300,000 men and women who were sterilised have claimed that they were sterilised against their will.

The Peruvian state has never taken full responsibility for the unconsented sterilisations and associated human rights violations that occurred. Legal cases against ex-President Fujimori and the ministers responsible for the sterilisation programme have been repeatedly delayed and shelved.

The Quipu project was developed as a way for those affected by the sterilisation programme to share their stories and experiences. Fusing internet technology with the radio and mobile phone technology available in the Peruvian Andes, the project developed a system that enables people to record their personal testimonies, listen to the experiences of others in their community and region, and share their stories with the rest of the world.

The project fuses basic communication technology with digital technology to enable excluded communities to share their stories with the world.

Policy implications

- It is possible to create the conditions for poor, rural communities to participate in local and international dialogue. This can be done through innovative use of available communication technologies such as radio and basic mobile or landline phones. Such opportunities should be maximised wherever possible.
- Participatory story-telling is a powerful way for communities to express and acknowledge injustices, and to build collective voice and visibility. As such, it should be a central element of truth and reconciliation processes in post-conflict and post-authoritarian countries.
- Building trust between rural communities, medical professionals and the Peruvian state is essential for post-authoritarian reconciliation in the country. This can only be achieved if past abuses (and contributing factors such as stereotypes about poor, indigenous women) are acknowledged.
- The Peruvian state must recognise and address the abuses committed in the name of the National Population Programme, whether through the legal case referred to above, or through collective reparations such as improved access to healthcare and other state services. This has been promised since the 1990s.

Key findings

- The women who helped develop the Quipu system in Huancabamba, northwestern Peru, want to tell their stories; they want the rest of Peru and the world to understand and recognise what happened to them, so that the abuses they suffered do not recur.
- They appreciate the opportunity to record and listen back to their own stories using the Quipu system. They value the fact that through this process of sharing stories their voice and place in the collective story is affirmed and acknowledged. This helps to build community.
- The Quipu system, with its fusing of basic communication technology and digital technology, can support local empowerment. It helps to build a collective voice and increase the visibility of marginalised groups. The system could be adapted to reinforce such processes in other post-conflict and post-authoritarian contexts.
- Participatory story-telling, and the recognition, voice and visibility it generates, can be an effective tool for acknowledging and addressing state-sanctioned injustices and abuses in post-authoritarian societies like Peru.

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Further information

The Quipu project is a collaboration between: Dr. Matthew Brown and Dr. Karen Tucker at the University of Bristol; Maria Court, Ewan Kass-Cavanagh, Ros Lerner and Sebastian Melo at Chaka Studio in London; IAMAMC – AMHBA in Huancabamba, Peru; and AMAEF in Cusco, Peru.

The Quipu system was developed through collaboration and iterative testing between September 2013 and January 2014. People in Huancabamba and Cusco used the system to share their stories between 2013 and 2015.

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The Quipu Project website, where you can listen to the stories that have been shared, will launch on 10 December 2015:
www.quipu-project.com

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