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## Using Video Testimonials to Give a Voice to the Poor

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### 1 The Data Demand and Challenge

South Sudan is a country with a very tumultuous recent history, witnessing more than its share of crises since 2013. The collapse of a fragile peace accord in 2016 led to a renewed military confrontation, while international oil prices simultaneously dropped, depriving South Sudan of its main source of foreign exchange. This triggered a severe fiscal and economic crisis, causing prices to skyrocket, and making many market products unaffordable for the majority of South Sudanese. Thus, securing livelihoods has become more and more difficult, with 66% of the population, a record high, living in poverty. While this number summarizes the country's poverty level, which is important for comparability and analyses to inform policies and programs, the number does not reveal the daily struggles that families face.

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The collection of household data is usually a passive process where respondents are asked pre-formulated questions. This constrains the respondents in sharing their own narratives and emphasizing what they feel is important. Giving a voice to the poor beyond being an anonymous and abstract data point is not only helpful to better understand the concerns of the poor, but also to empower them to create a narrative that they own. While some social programs include activities to empower the poor by giving them a voice, the implementation of household surveys is an opportunity that is often missed, in terms of using direct contact with the population across a country to transform a one-sided narrative into one that empowers the poor.

## 2 The Innovation

To empower the poor and bring humanity to an abstract poverty-related number, we decided to collect short, voluntary video testimonials from people living in South Sudan as part of the High Frequency South Sudan Survey. The High Frequency Survey conducts household interviews in urban and rural areas in South Sudan. The survey is used to collect consumption data in order to estimate poverty, and to measure other socio-economic indicators. As the data is collected using tablets, we decided to utilize the full capability of the tablets by recording voluntary videos after the structured interview if the respondent consented. The video testimonials were subsequently edited, English subtitles were added as translations to the local languages, and noise filters were used to enhance audio quality. The video testimonials were then categorized into themes such as poverty and livelihoods or security and displacement, and were published on the dedicated website [www.thepulseofsouthsudan.com](http://www.thepulseofsouthsudan.com).

## 3 Key Results

The testimonials captured the dire situation in South Sudan, revealing what it is like to live in poverty. They were shown as part of workshops and conferences as well as available on a website. While abstract data

may help the government fine-tune its policies, the videos depict the sense of powerlessness, the pain of hunger, and the feelings of hopelessness and disappointment that characterize people's experiences. The testimonials capture the struggle of parents watching their children starve, not being able to provide for them or send them to school, and knowing that tomorrow will not be a better day.

The opportunity for the poor to voice their struggles is a first step toward empowerment, allowing them to share their lives with the world. The testimonials can also serve to inspire policymakers to continue finding innovative ways to help the respondents and millions of others like them to escape poverty. While there is no substitute for quantitative analysis in designing programs and policies, such video testimonials are an effective tool to raise awareness about the concerns of the poorest. They make it clear that poverty is not just a number but a human struggle.

## **4 Implementation Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Next Steps**

We started collecting video testimonials in a pilot, without providing specific training or additional equipment to the enumerators. When we watched these testimonials, we quickly realized that some training was essential. While the videos often started by recording the faces of the respondents, the camera usually moved downwards after a few seconds and ended up recording only their feet or the dust on the ground. Loud wind or other noises sometimes drowned out the voices of the respondents.

To improve the quality of the recordings, we collaborated with journalists and documentary producers to design a one-day training for the enumerators. The training was used to introduce two pieces of very inexpensive but essential equipment: A tripod was necessary to ensure that the camera remained steady and focused on the respondent; and a microphone that could be clipped to the shirt of the respondent ensured that the voice would be audible. The training also included professional guidance on asking open-ended questions to initiate the video

testimonial. The success of the training was evidenced in the remarkable quality of video testimonials that were recorded after the training.

During the fieldwork period, there was a decline in the number and the quality of video testimonials. Naturally, enumerators were exposed to various pressures, and were required to conduct as many interviews of sufficient quality as possible. To create more space for video testimonials and to focus on the quality of videos, we introduced monetary incentives for enumerators recording the most and the best video testimonials. The enumerators welcomed this competition with each other, and we saw an increase in the number and the quality of testimonials.

The World Bank's inaugural flagship report, *Poverty, and Shared Prosperity 2016: Taking on Inequality*, raised concerns about addressing prevalent data gaps in measuring poverty. The World Bank has therefore pledged to ensure that the 78 poorest nations have household-level surveys every three years. To date, 41 of 48 Sub-Saharan African countries have surveys ongoing or planned over the next two years. These surveys also represent an opportunity to give more voice to the poor. Our experience in South Sudan shows that recording testimonials is an extremely low-cost intervention when implemented in conjunction with a household survey. In fact, the additional costs in South Sudan were below US\$50k—a small percentage of the overall survey costs. Giving a voice to the poor brings us one step closer to achieving our goals of ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity by 2030.

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