

GATHERING CREDIBLE HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTATION

The information below is adapted from training materials of Manushya Foundation (Thailand) in the context of the project Raising Our Voices To Save Our Future.

Human rights documentation means gathering evidence about human rights violations. Evidence can take many forms and include testimonies, official documents, medical records, environmental reports, photos, videos and secondary evidence such as news reports, social media, desk research reports.

Documentation should be understood to be more than reading that something has happened, believing that something happened, or talking to someone that says something has happened. Just because someone told you something doesn't mean that you have documented it. Instead, it is important to ensure that the evidence you gather is credible.



What credible evidence means:

Credible evidence means evidence that can be trusted or relied on. Credibility can be subjective. Too often community-led data is dismissed as not legitimate or objective. These claims that often mask political choices about whose voices and 'evidence' count. Yet, precisely because community-led data tends to be delegitimised, it is important to ensure that the data is as strong and accurate as possible.

HOW TO ENSURE YOU COLLECT CREDIBLE EVIDENCE:

MAINTAIN OBJECTIVITY

It's very common to start a research thinking that you already know what happened, and gathering only the evidence that supports your idea - this is known as 'confirmation bias' and can make your evidence not credible. To avoid reflecting this bias you should ensure that:

- Your final judgment/analysis is based ONLY on the evidence you have gathered and verified (see below). Research findings should be limited to the conclusions supported by the evidence.
- Don't exaggerate the extent of the violations or impacts you are documenting.
- Maintain "healthy skepticism" towards your own bias and judgment and remember we all tend to underestimate our ability to be wrong!
- Ensure that every piece of evidence is corroborated/verified (see below).

USE MULTIPLE SOURCES OF DATA

Do not rely only on testimonies but try to also gather official documents (e.g. government statements or letters), take pictures or videos etc.

KEEP IT ON THE RECORD

Keep a detailed record of how, when and where you gathered every single piece of evidence. If you're writing an advocacy report or engaging with the media, you will need to be able to demonstrate how you reached your findings, how many people you interviewed and when etc. The best way to do this is to use an excel sheet to track details of you interviewed and when, where and when you took a picture, etc. To protect anonymity and confidentiality of research participants, you can assign them codes or use names initials instead of their full names.

INVOLVE ALLIES AND PARTNERS (e.g. NGOs, research institutes)

Involve them in the research early on, for instance by seeking their inputs on your research questions, or discussing the findings. This will help gain 'buy-in' from other groups and ensure that the findings are supported and disseminated by other groups.

VERIFY YOUR DATA

Evidence can be misleading, fabricated, or false. This can apply to any type of evidence: a testimony might be false; a picture that shows a human rights violation might be photoshopped or be taken in another place or time; a medical report might be forged. Verification (or corroboration) is important to make your evidence credible as well as to avoid potential backlash from people who may feel threatened by the findings.

To verify your data:

- Collect multiple pieces of evidence and determine if they are consistent or not. For instance, gathering one testimony about a specific incident/issue may not be enough to prove that it has happened. Think of additional types of evidence (photos, records) that you might gather, or, if not possible, verify the information by gathering at least 2 other testimonies.
- Often it will be details that are not related to the main human rights violation that show whether the two pieces of evidence are consistent.
- Any kind of evidence can corroborate another source of evidence.

CONSENT AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Informed consent is needed from any person taking part in the research, including survey respondents, FGD participants, interviewees, people who are video recorded or photographed. Their personal information, and sometimes the information they provide, needs to be treated confidentially.

Generally speaking, informed consent means that the person must understand what you are doing and be willing to participate in the research. It is 'informed' because the person should be given all the information related to the research and how their data will be used, including any risks associated with it. Consent doesn't necessarily have to be taken in writing (e.g. if the people you are interviewing are not literate). If you're taking a video or audio recordings, or if the person you are interviewing is not literate, you can ask them to give consent orally. What's important is that people have it clear what they are doing and have a chance to opt out or not answer if they don't want to.

Respecting confidentiality means avoiding to disclose personal information (for instance, name, address) or any information that the person you are interviewing asks you not to disclose. Confidentiality is essential to obtain consent but also to ensure that people feel comfortable answering questions and sharing their views. At the beginning of an interview you should ask the person whether and how they want to be identified as part of your research (e.g. in the final report or other outputs), and also provide the opportunity to request confidentiality over a specific piece of information. As a general rule, you should avoid disclosing any personal information, unless it is extremely necessary and the person has given consent.



Common issues that can weaken the credibility of your research:

- Making factual errors in your analysis
- Exaggerating the impacts of a problem, or the number of people affected
- Using findings from FGDs and interviews to make generalised statements about an entire community
- Breaking commitments you made with testimonies and key informants
- Make statements/conclusions that are not fully supported by evidence