

# PARTICIPATORY ARTS IN VICTIM-LED TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

POLICY PAPER

*"I paint flowers so they will not die." — Frida Kahlo*

## INTRODUCTION

The arts, and cultural initiatives more generally, can play a key role in victim-centered transitional justice processes, not only because of their ability to reach broad audiences, but also because of their capacity to integrate groups of victims into the production of truth narratives, strengthening the legitimacy of more formal transitional justice processes<sup>1</sup>.

## SUMMARY

In societies where formal transitional justice mechanisms have not been established through special courts or truth commissions, truth-telling initiatives<sup>2</sup> led by victims and civil society through artistic and cultural initiatives often become the main channel for the dissemination of victim-centered narratives. Even in societies where there is a formal transitional justice process in place, courts and truth commissions may be insufficient to implement a comprehensive process of truth and reconciliation. Not only do such institutions often lack the time and resources to adequately meet the needs and expectations of all victims and civil society, but they regularly become so focused on fostering a rapid process of reconciliation that they sometimes overlook local truth-telling needs.



Colombian children hold "mochila" bags created by community members in honor of their lost loved ones. Intergenerational understanding of conflict is key to preventing recurrence of violence.

Although participatory artistic productions can originate in institutions as part of a symbolic reparations program, or be founded by artists who want to encourage society to deal with the past, victim-led initiatives offer numerous additional benefits to transitional justice processes, beyond the artistic products themselves and their awareness raising capacities. The most important aspect of these initiatives is the truth-telling component and the capacity to trigger social dialogue processes. Although not all of the details in stories shared during truth-telling activities may expressly appear in the end products, these individualized accounts grant a stronger relevance to informal transitional justice processes. For instance, follow up activities engaging victims and a broader public in dialogue not only raise public awareness and offer opportunities for communities to confront their past, but also contribute to the healing process of victims. Additionally, symbolic languages in arts and crafts offer powerful tools of representation and anonymization with the capacity to encourage an additional truth-sharing experiences that involve dealing with difficult pasts even under challenging circumstances – for instance, in a context where victims may have preferred to keep silent due to the persistence of violence, fear of reprisals, or the risks of survivors being exposed to stigma and social isolation.

## KEY FINDINGS

GIJTR's projects around the world reveal that artistic and cultural initiatives developed with extensive participation of victim groups, or directly led and implemented by victims, have a high impact, with some of the main advantages listed here.

- The development of a working group of victims provides participants with a safe environment to share sensitive personal stories, and, for many, represents the first opportunity they have had to begin to heal in a larger, social setting.
- Truth narratives are more effective when based on personal stories instead of interpretations or assumptions stemming from generalizations because they can more effectively foster dialogue and reconciliation processes between groups of victims and broader society.
- Handcrafting workshops around truth-telling in a safe and trustworthy environment boost emotional processes of bereavement in victims.
- Participants see in these artistic or cultural products made participatorily a representation of their personal stories, with the advantage that their vulnerability is protected by the anonymization offered by symbolic language.
- Artifacts with a personal charge – such as photos, personal objects, or objects handcrafted by participants such as patchwork scenes, paintings, etc. – have the ability to generate a greater impact

### THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE FOR JUSTICE, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

In 2014, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) launched the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR), a consortium of nine international organizations focused on offering holistic, integrative and multidisciplinary approaches to issues of truth, justice and reconciliation. GIJTR works primarily with local populations, civil society organizations, survivors and governments to develop transitional justice approaches that are victim-centered, collaborative, and support dignity, respect, inclusion, and transparency in societies emerging from conflict or periods of authoritarian rule. Since its founding, GIJTR has engaged with people from 72 countries, worked with 681 CSOs, and has conducted 323 community-driven projects and supported 5040 initiatives dealing with human rights violations.

For more information, please visit [gijtr.org](http://gijtr.org).



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than most materials produced by non-victims because they more readily foster empathy and local ownership.

- Participatory art and cultural projects spark the interest of silent victims in the community to get involved in the process of sharing their stories.
- The dissemination of artistic and cultural products based on victims' narratives foster reconciliation processes in communities, especially when accompanied with spaces of open dialogue between participants and visitors, such as those offered by exhibitions and performances.
- Participatory art projects, particularly those focused on truth-telling, generally lead to an increase in confidence among victims and communities and stimulate their interest in engaging in more formal processes of truth-seeking and accountability through state institutions.
- Awareness raising at the local level encourages social ownership of transitional justice processes of truth-telling, accountability and reconciliation, which makes the processes more sustainable and likely to succeed.
- Truth-telling through arts and cultural expressions strengthen the advocacy capacity of victims and CSOs in requesting response from the state.

## CASE STUDIES

### COMMUNITY TRUTH-TELLING THROUGH TEXTILES IN ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS IN BANGLADESH

Facilitated by the GIJTR's Rohingya Documentation project, dozens of women in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have participated in workshops to create textiles representing their experiences, expectations, and hopes for the future. The cloths were then assembled in an exhibition in the camps, offering the community a space to discuss their experiences as refugees. Some of the images of hands and flowers became popular in some of the camps as a symbol of resilience. The capacity of handcrafted arts to offer both the "manufacturers" and the "users" a sense of a shared experience contributes to individual and social healing and thus often plays an important role in the reconstruction of the social fabric.



Textiles created by Rohingya women during a 2020 GIJTR workshop lead by GIJTR partner Asia Justice and Rights and the Liberation War Museum, an ICSC member, in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh.

## COMMUNITY STORIES IN PAINTINGS AND BODY MAPPING IN GUINEA

GIJTR's arts programs in Guinea, facilitated in partnership with COJEDEV, a local civil society organization, convened a group of artists to illustrate stories previously prepared by youths about their experiences of violence and human rights violations during political protests in the country. An exhibition of the paintings not only helped to preserve these stories, but also helped raise awareness of the need for accountability and institutional reform. The project's facilitators also catalyzed community conversations about atrocity prevention strategies by hosting – alongside the exhibition – community dialogue sessions between participants, visitors, and security forces. These and other additional GIJTR awareness raising activities that use the arts have strengthened the advocacy capacity of COJEDEV and other local CSOs who have used them to amplify their demand for the reopening of the judicial process against the perpetrators of the 2009 "Stadium Massacre" in Guinea, in which security forces killed at least 157 pro-democracy protestors and injured well over 1000 more. Another art-based project that GIJTR has implemented in Guinea to advocate for justice and reconciliation processes is body-mapping, a technique through which survivors share their own stories of pain, violence and displacement through life-sized drawings of their bodies, which are complemented by symbolic descriptions of trauma from their past. The process of creating the body maps allows survivors to work alongside others who have had similar experiences of violence and to create dialogue allowing the survivors to feel a sense of recognition for the pain they have endured. These body maps were also exhibited to politicians, journalists and members of the public to raise awareness and build bridges with other sectors.



A painting of a youth's account of human rights violations during political protests in Guinea at an exhibition sponsored by the GIJTR.

## COMMUNITY CRAFTS TO FOSTER DIALOGUE IN SILENCED COMMUNITIES IN COLOMBIA

Community truth-telling projects have been supported by the GIJTR in Colombia to encourage the active participation of victims in the truth-seeking processes of the Truth Commission. In El Castillo, hand-made dolls by victims of the armed conflict were crafted to include an MP3 recording of a victim's testimony inside. Although there is widespread fear and discomfort in the community about speaking publicly about the conflict, after the dolls were exhibited to the public, a number of victims in the community asked to be part of



An exhibition of hand-made dolls made by victims of the armed conflict in honor of their missing loved ones.

the process and wanted to create their own doll with an anonymized testimony. In another example, a grassroots women's organization in the indigenous Wayúu community developed workshops to create truth-telling "mochila" bags representing their family members lost in the armed conflict, and each containing information about them inside. During a traveling exhibition through Wayúu settlements and villages, attendees showed a strong interest in contributing to the project with their own testimonies, which were then collected by the organization. Again, in this context, truth-telling activities through art have often encouraged communities to initiate a process of social dialogue after a long period of silence. In some cases, the stories collected became the basis for these communities' initial dialogue with the Truth Commission's regional offices, a significant step to participating in an interview with the Truth Commission's documentation team. While the specific artistic techniques were very important to ensuring the quality of the final products, the most important parts of the experience were the dialogue processes – both informal and formal – that originated from sharing the art projects with communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- When developing an action plan to strengthen transitional justice processes through arts and culture, donors and implementers should focus on outlying regions and underrepresented communities. Developing symbolic truth-telling initiatives to represent traumatic events of victims and survivors for the first time through simple crafts and arts will spark community dialogue and engagement in wider truth-telling, memorialization, reconciliation and healing processes.
- While project implementation must generally be carried out by organizations to strengthen sustainability of the process, it is necessary to ensure that this organizational intervention does not hinder the inclusion of victims' voices in the process. Transitional justice mechanisms should be encouraged to promote community-led initiatives of artistic processes to broaden the reach of mechanisms, while ensuring that victims lead in the content creation process. By supporting and actively participating in spaces of dialogue opened by victim-led truth-telling artistic and cultural initiatives, transitional justice institutions and government institutions have an opportunity to increase the legitimacy of a transitional process leading to social healing and reconciliation.
- In participatory arts and culture programs with groups of victims, it is advisable to ensure the active participation of local artists to train participants in technical skills and to facilitate the successful development of end products that combine narratives of victims with artistic techniques. It is necessary to ensure that they adhere to the expressed needs and expectations of participating victims. Artists should undergo trainings to support this so that they accompany the process rather than just contribute with techniques and production.
- While real stories will be the basis for content development in the most effective artistic and cultural initiatives, in most cases they should not appear in detail in the final products. Anonymity of sources and personal stories should be ensured where necessary through symbolic representation.
- Following the do-no-harm principle, the coordinating team should provide psychosocial accompaniment to participants involved in the process of sharing their stories.
- Community and victim-led truth-telling through artistic and cultural initiatives should be accompanied, as much as possible, by activities encouraging direct dialogue between participants, the public and representatives of state institutions. Where possible, dissemination of results should be planned from the outset. While it is necessary to ensure the autonomy of civil society initiatives, some form of support, at least

symbolic, of transitional justice mechanisms or public institutions strengthens the legitimacy of these informal transitional justice process.

- Under circumstances where there are risks related to the persistence of an armed conflict, there will be security challenges for local narratives. However, a culture of truth-seeking and reconciliation can still be fostered, and risks for local leaders mitigated, through the symbolic languages of artistic products.

## FURTHER READING

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### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Formal transitional justice refers to mechanisms involving the action of the state, such as domestic instruments of accountability and reparations – i.e. truth commissions, search units, victims' reparations units, community justice systems with binding legal attributions, or international mechanisms such as ad-hoc tribunals, international courts or commissions of inquiry. Informal transitional justice refers to truth-seeking, memorialization and awareness raising processes developed entirely by civil society without the participation of the state.
- <sup>2</sup> As opposed to historical memory, which gives a broader overview of history, truth-telling is more factual, personal and precise. Truth-telling initiatives aim to help participants uncover their individual experiences, which not only helps validate their unique stories, but is very helpful in verifying facts related to human rights abuses.



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