

MAPPING COMMEMORATIVE CULTURES, BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

POLICY PAPER



Families of the disappeared on September 29, 2016 at the occasion of the “Day Against Forgetting”. Image credit: Collectif des familles de Disparus en Algérie

INTRODUCTION

Memorialization processes, in their many forms, are an essential component and key pillar of transitional justice. Both “official” narratives promoted by authorities and victim- and survivor-centered narratives can have a profound impact on how people perceive the past, in turn influencing the outcomes of other truth, justice and reconciliation efforts.

SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

The marking of commemorative dates and practices as part of memorialization initiatives can help establish a collective record of events and serve as a recognition of human rights violations, and possibly even as an apology, for legitimizing the experiences of victims and survivors. This can serve as history education for future generations, promoting civic engagement, democracy building and important lessons for future nonrecurrence. It may also be integrated into wider reparations strategies, as the recognition of victim-centered narratives can encourage the reintegration of victims and survivors into society. Conscientious commemorative practices have tremendous potential to strengthen the social fabric of society and rebuild communal bonds that were decimated in the course of violent conflict.

However, since those dates have become more visible online and on social networks, their commemoration can

often trigger points of contention and resurface dangerous rhetoric – views that may turn into open violent threats. The marking of commemorative dates and practices can also point to issues of citizenship and belonging, where government-led initiatives prioritize narratives of heroic triumphalism or suffering of the nation over the narratives of victims considered not “theirs.” In the absence of empathy and factual consensus, commemorative practices can also be maliciously hijacked for political purposes, used to promote divisive ideologies and wielded to inflict harm.

Transitional justice stakeholders should consider key findings from case studies of commemoration in various political contexts to best support and promote victim/survivor-centered narratives where they may be otherwise neglected.

- Long after the end of a conflict, certain sectors have a vested interest in maintaining narratives of denial and silence, to uphold impunity for state actors responsible for grave human rights violations of the past. Threats and attacks against victims, survivors, victims’ families and human rights defenders are exceedingly common. In some post-conflict settings, victims, survivors and families of victims often belong to vulnerable demographics and continue to be marginalized in society today, while perpetrators often remain part of powerful interest groups.
- Official narratives of violence often correspond to the shortcomings of criminal justice processes by further neglecting the victims whose rights were violated by political or military leadership.
- Public narratives about past violence shift over time, in response to political events and changes in the political atmosphere. The official narrative of what occurred can change according to the state’s political agenda; when the public narrative is, or moves toward, one of denial of past atrocities, it deprives the victims and their families of their right to truth and justice. By the same token, official efforts to commemorate or repair are often superficial and not necessarily accompanied by the implementation of meaningful actions of reparation and accountability.
- The reticence or refusal of governments to engage in official commemoration for a particular date may be politically tied not only to the politics of that event or conflict but also to other events, conflicts or issues relevant to the present discourse. For example, a politician may refuse to attend a memorial ceremony because they wish to avoid media scrutiny on another issue. More broadly, a government may not fund a particular memorial project because it is in their political interest to focus the public’s attention on existential or ideological issues rather than highlight in-country human rights violations.
- Victims and families are the catalyst for acts of commemoration and for upholding and sharing a narrative that prioritizes the truth rather than maintaining impunity. Acts of commemoration have been carried out first and foremost by survivors and relatives of victims, even while conflicts were still underway, and in an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. In this context, memory work can carry personal risks to safety and security. Without the persistence of survivors and the families of the victims, past atrocities would not be widely known on the national or international level.

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 & 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 and 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 civil society organizations, conducted 323 community-driven projects, and documented more than 5,040 human rights violations.

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



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- In some cases, establishing a common version of events, the “truth” of what happened, is the best course of action for victim- and survivor-centered memory work. However, some events have never had a clear timeline, and establishing and promoting one narrative may not be possible. Commonality for the purpose of reconciliation may be found elsewhere, like in the hope for a peaceful and democratic future.
- Civil society–led initiatives can prove popular with communities and grow quickly to nationwide or even international projects under the right circumstances. Such growth requires further funds, human resources and high levels of coordination. With the added pressures of the global pandemic, a lack of resources and coordination can hamper commemoration projects to the point of collapse.
- The accompaniment and solidarity of civil society human rights organizations play an important role in enabling victims and survivors to claim their rights and for meeting the transitional justice aims of truth, justice, reparation and nonrepetition.
- Partnering with international organizations or other grant-making bodies can provide civil society with new opportunities for commemoration projects but can also bring challenges of bureaucracy, control and integrity. Although the onus should be on the larger organizations to work better for those on the ground, some processes and compromises in this type of relationship may be unavoidable.

CASE STUDIES

CROATIA, DECEMBER 7, 1991

On December 7, 1991, three members of the Zec family – Mihajlo, Marija, and their 12-year-old daughter, Aleksandra – were killed in Zagreb, Croatia. Even though the perpetrators, members of state forces, confessed the crime, they were set free. Appalled by the injustice done to this family based on their Serb ethnicity, the state’s responsibility for the crime and the lack of dealing with this past responsibly, civil society has been speaking out about the Zec family tragedy through artistic programs, annual commemorations on the anniversary of their death and advocacy for a more permanent memory through a public space named after the Zec family members.

The serious shortcomings of the criminal justice processes in the Zec family case correspond to an official narrative that neglects the victims for whom the Croatian political and military leadership is responsible. This crime, whose direct perpetrators were not held accountable, is not officially commemorated.

Civil society’s continued efforts have led to some change toward greater official recognition of the crimes committed against the Zec family members. The critical efforts to remember the Zec family include Oliver Frlić’s theater production *Aleksandra Zec*, annual commemorations held by the Anti-Fascist League of the Republic of Croatia and memorialization advocacy efforts of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights



Youth Initiative for Human Rights – Croatia and the Unmarked Sites of Atrocities initiative from Bosnia and Herzegovina collaborated by putting a temporary sign that states “Unmarked Site of Atrocity: At this place, in the previous war, inhumane acts were conducted against people. Not letting these events go into oblivion, we stand in solidarity with all victims, for it to never happen again to anyone”. The sign was placed at Sljeme, the hill above Zagreb, where Aleksandra and Marija Zec were killed.

Youth Initiative for Human Rights – Croatia. “Sljeme - Unmarked Site of Atrocity”. Digital Image. 2018.

(YIHR). The play *Aleksandra Zec* addresses what is missing from historiographical narratives, education and monuments. Similarly, while pursuing the goal to name a public space after the Zec family, YIHR collaborated with the Unmarked Sites of Atrocities, marking temporarily the sites of the crimes against the Zec family. Regarding the annual commemorations, the Anti-Fascist League of the Republic of Croatia wants its commemorative approach “to become the behavior of the country, society, for people to admit and recognize [what had happened to the Zec family].”¹ In addition to supporting the commemorations organized by the Anti-Fascist League of the Republic of Croatia, ahead of the 2021 commemoration, YIHR sent the mayor of Zagreb a handbook, *Inclusive Memory: Recommendations for the Commemoration of Civilian War Victims for the Representatives of Local Authorities in the Republic of Croatia*, thereby offering concrete direction for an institutional dealing with the past.² One of the most important lessons learned from commemorating the crimes against the Zec family is the effort the civil society actors have put to engage and encourage politicians and institutions to deal with this past too. That governmental representatives at the local and national levels attended commemorations of the Zec family over the past two years represents a step toward the establishment of official memory politics that would include the Zec family and other similar cases, contrary to the current practice.

HAITI, APRIL 26, 1963

On April 26, 1963, François Duvalier orchestrated what would become the most known massacre of his family’s 30-year dictatorship, targeting military personnel and their families who were deemed “problematic.” More than 500 people were killed, arrested or never seen again. The events of April 26 were just one of many strategic massacres during this period, most of which targeted rural communities. For the first time after the end of dictatorship, April 26 was commemorated in 1986 with a procession of several thousand people to Fort Dimanche, the notorious state prison. They were met by armed guards who fired at the agitated crowd, killing seven people and wounding many others.

Since then, Haiti has remained in a state of protracted political instability because of the legacy of violent dictatorship and continued influence of international actors. Formal recognition or justice for the crimes of the dictatorship and subsequent military regime has been negligible and short-lived. While there have been some attempts toward formal justice in Haiti, such as the National Truth and Justice Commission (1994-1996) investigating human rights abuses from 1991 to 1994, an enduring culture of impunity and a reluctance to “stir up the ashes of the past” has left the work of transitional justice and the commemoration of April 26 almost entirely to community-led interventions.³

In 2013, the 50th anniversary of the massacre, Devoir de Mémoire-Haïti (DDMH) planned the first commemoration since 1986, seeking to shed light on the past for a younger generation. Many people contributed by sharing their photographs, documents and testimonies of April 26 for the first time. Services were held in three Haitian cities and around the world.⁴ Since then, DDMH has grown to organize religious services, banners, social media posts, an educational play, a traveling exhibition and a conference on transitional justice and past crimes, directing particular efforts toward access for and inclusion of rural communities.



Commemoration from April 26, 2022. Devoir de Mémoire received a lot of verbal support for the occasion but between gas shortages and security concerns, few people were able to attend in person. (Image credit: Devoir de Mémoire)

While community-led initiatives such as DDMH may receive authorization or vague encouragement to commemorate by government officials, they have yet to offer any support or sponsorship. A 2015 presidential decree dedicating April 26 as a National Day of Remembrance of Victims of Fort Dimanche, rather than a day for victims of the dictatorship, stated that flags would be flown at half-mast and invited organizations and the public to mark the occasion but did not acknowledge the crimes or the responsibility of the state.

DDMH grapples with an overall lack of funding and human resources, as well as bureaucratic challenges and delays in the granting of funds only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Working with international partners also raises challenges of integrity for community-led initiatives, where protocols require that certain officials, some of whom are known human rights violators or symbols of impunity, be invited to events or consulted on projects. Community-led commemoration initiatives in Haiti have thus been compelled into resourcefulness, relying on volunteers to document valuable testimonies before they are lost in time, and the support of local businesses and figures to disseminate their message. They are forced to make difficult decisions where the offer of financial support or credibility could come at the expense of community trust, reputation or the integrity of victim/survivor-centered projects.

LEBANON, APRIL 13, 1975

The Lebanese Civil War was a devastating 15-year cycle of violence and political struggle, the legacy of which still reverberates in the country today. In fact, with the current crisis in Lebanon, which incriminates the political class that emerged from the war, reinforces the impression that the war is still not over. Without a definitive end date, many people therefore choose to commemorate the beginning of the conflict, April 13, 1975. The violent armed altercations that broke out in the suburbs of Beirut between Palestinian and Lebanese individuals and groups on April 13 were politically contested almost immediately. Different parties rushed to offer their own sequence of events and report of the casualties, fueling confusion and controversy that prevails 47 years later.



In commemoration of the war, ACT launched a memory map and installed 3D figures representing the disappeared in 35 different locations in Beirut and the suburbs where people got kidnapped. Each figure carried the following message: "People were abducted here. Here or there, it is time to know what happened to them". Image Credit: ACT for the Disappeared archive 2018.

For the most part, the Lebanese state has refrained from official commemoration efforts, fearing that bringing up the past could fuel intercommunal tensions and cause problems for political leaders who were former militia leaders. In the late 1990s, when asked whether there would be a war memorial in Lebanon, Interior Minister Michel el-Murr answered that the Lebanese Army already had a memorial. When asked about the victims, he replied that the army represents the nation.⁵ Events of the civil war still do not appear in curricular history books, frustrating younger generations. Some parties have independently commemorated their own version of events on April 13, but national commemoration projects are mostly short term, stalled or abandoned.

Lebanese civil society has lobbied for war-related issues; held seminars, exhibitions, vigils and educational interventions; and set up online spaces for virtual commemoration to fill the void of state action. The slogan "It is our right to know," introduced by the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared, has resounded loudly throughout the country, ultimately leading to Law 105/2018,

which recognized the “right to know,” publicly certified the state of “disappeared” and defined the mandate of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared. While the commission is still not operational because of a lack of budget, grassroots documentation initiatives have been integral in laying the groundwork for this development. Act for the Disappeared (ACT), a Lebanese human rights association, has created an online memorial called FUSHAT AMAL (“Space for Hope”) that collects and displays information about missing persons, aiming to reclaim their identities and restore their rightful place as members of society. ACT pressures authorities to create an official list of the disappeared and works to document and clarify the events of the civil war to prepare the ground for the National Commission. Additionally, ACT has led arts-based projects for family members to creatively commemorate their loved ones, such as the Empty Chairs, Waiting Families project in partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Nevertheless, organizations like ACT face significant coordination challenges that come along with decentralized civil society organizing, such as overlapping schedules and a failure to combine archiving efforts. In contexts where centralized, official commemoration is unlikely, community-led initiatives should make every effort to coordinate and collaborate toward their shared goals.

EL SALVADOR, DECEMBER 11, 1981

From 1980 to 1992, El Salvador endured a brutal internal conflict, during which at least 75,000 people were killed; thousands more were victims of enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence and forced displacement. The Salvadoran government was responsible for the majority of these violations. However, the opposition force Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional also committed human rights abuses against civilians. The El Mozote massacre, the largest massacre of civilians in Latin America during the second half of the 20th century, took place on December 11, 1981. After capturing residents of the El Mozote hamlet and holding them overnight, units of the Atlacatl military battalion systematically tortured and executed the men, and then executed the women and children.⁶ Over the following days the armed forces committed a series of other mass killings in surrounding areas; in total, nearly 1,000 innocent civilians were killed.

Official narratives around the El Mozote massacre have minimized state accountability and helped to maintain impunity for the perpetrators. The military has presented the massacre as an armed confrontation, where the armed forces carried out a legitimate and successful operation against guerrilla forces. The state has also denied that the massacre occurred at all⁷ or presented the death of civilians in El Mozote as “collateral damage” to legitimate war actions.⁸ Finally, the official narrative of the massacre, as well as the conflict in general, has been one of silence. For nearly three decades, the state has largely kept quiet about the horrific abuses committed during the conflict and ignored the needs and rights of victims.⁹ In addition to policies that cemented impunity for perpetrators, the overall strategy of the Salvadoran government has been “an institutionalized and generalized system of denial and forgetting of past violations.”¹⁰



Memorial with the names of victims of the El Mozote massacre, which occurred during the armed conflict in El Salvador.

More recently, and particularly following emblematic rulings by the Inter-American Human Rights System and the 2016 repeal of El Salvador's amnesty law – thanks to tireless advocacy from victims and human rights groups – the Salvadoran state has begun to acknowledge responsibility for the atrocities committed at El Mozote and surrounding areas. Since the 2011 Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling on the El Mozote case, El Salvador's presidents have participated in commemorative acts, making speeches on the anniversary of the massacre. Additionally, the state has invested in services and infrastructure for the El Mozote community and improvements to the physical memorial to the massacred victims. While the executive branch has established a reparations program for conflict victims, no comprehensive measures have been implemented for the benefit of the victims, nor has the state promoted accountability for the massacre's perpetrators. While the current presidential administration recognizes that the massacre occurred, it blames previous political parties for not doing more for the victims.

Victims and survivors' narratives about the El Mozote massacre emphasize the atrocities that occurred, the state's accountability for those atrocities and the ongoing impunity for the perpetrators. While there are no systematic records on when exactly acts of commemoration of the massacre began, it is certain that survivors and victims' relatives began commemorations while the conflict was still going on, in an atmosphere of fear and insecurity.¹¹ When repatriation from refugee camps began in 1991,¹² the community of El Mozote began to hold annual acts of remembrance. Each year on the anniversary of the massacre, victims and survivors, families and civil society hold a ceremony at the site of the El Mozote memorial. They carry out a walk, make speeches including survivors recounting their experiences of the massacre, make offerings and participate in other cultural acts. These activities are coordinated by victims and survivors' organizations, and they often invite national and international political, diplomatic and civil society actors to attend. Survivors also commemorate in private, inside their homes or with family groups. Local civil society organizations also carry out commemorations. Cristosal, a civil society human rights organization that represents victims of El Salvador's conflict, for example, commemorates the El Mozote massacre through publicity campaigns using social media, with narratives that speak to an urban public of all ages, including young people who do not have memories of the civil war. Other organizations, like Due Process of Law Foundation, also engage in this type of strategy to commemorate the atrocities of the past and bring attention to the struggle of victims and the ongoing fight to claim their rights to truth, justice and reparation. Cristosal sometimes carries out solo campaigns, in some cases as part of a collective with other human rights organizations.

The resilience and perseverance of victims, their families and human rights defenders are what continues to keep the historical memory of past atrocities alive in modern society. Internal organization and the linking of victims with other national and international social actors to form networks has been key for promoting community-led commemorative initiatives and countering official narratives that minimize or deny the violations of the past. Just as official narratives and tactics can change, sometimes the strategy for promoting victims' narratives and rights needs to adapt to changing contexts. The sharing of victims' narratives through educational and cultural processes, as well as media, plays an important role in shaping historical memory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A facts-based approach is essential to commemorative practices in divided societies. To achieve progress and lasting peace in post-conflict societies, it is necessary to acknowledge the full extent of human suffering, identify the individuals and structures responsible for this suffering and move forward with inclusive identities that allow space for diversity, solidarity and remorse.
- Narratives of past atrocities and commemorative acts and practices should center on victims and survivors. Consultation with victims is essential for official commemorative and reparative acts, as well as non-official commemorative acts, to have meaning and fulfill victims' rights and also to ensure that victims are not revictimized. Initiatives should identify the most marginalized victims and survivors in the community and direct particular attention toward accessibility and inclusion, ensuring that the most marginalized also have access to justice through memory.
- Civil society actors should seek to engage and encourage politicians and institutions to deal with past human rights violations. The presence of politicians has the potential to reshape memory politics in a way that would emphasize learning from the past and preventing future crimes. Civil society should work to identify the key barriers and challenges to official commemoration if that is the desired outcome and, where possible and appropriate, work toward laying the groundwork for these projects.
- Civil society-led initiatives must be resourceful in their efforts to commemorate, particularly when they face governments apathetic or hostile to their cause. Without state funding, initiatives might look to grant-making international organizations, the private sector or local businesses for financial resources. Equally, they might engage their local community through volunteerism.
- Where multiple civil society organizations work to fill the void of official commemoration, they should communicate, coordinate and collaborate as much as possible with each other to achieve their shared goals with the limited resources available. For example, they should avoid scheduling conflicting events, and look to find ways that their work can complement, rather than compete with, one another.
- States should comply with international standards, recommendations and resolutions regarding victims' rights, historical memory and commemorative and reparative measures. It is essential that commemorative acts go beyond speeches and symbolic measures and be based on meaningful dialogue and exchanges with civil society organizations, academics and victims/survivors. While symbolic measures are extremely important, comprehensive reparations must be implemented to fulfill victims' rights.
- States must ensure adequate protection measures for victims and survivors, victims' families and the human rights defenders and organizations who accompany them, in recognition of their ongoing vulnerability and the threats they face as a result of their role and work fighting for victims' rights and against impunity.
- International organizations that fund or otherwise support civil society-led initiatives should take community concerns seriously and prioritize the safety, security and dignity of victims and survivors.
- Grant-making international organizations should work toward developing funding processes that work more reliably and effectively for smaller-scale initiatives that rely on funds more immediately. Payment schedules and deliverables should be communicated clearly from the start of the partnership to manage expectations.

FURTHER READING

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 At the moment, the handbook ‘Inclusive Memory: Recommendations for the Commemoration of Civilian War Victims for the Representatives of Local Authorities in the Republic of Croatia’ is only available in the Croatian language here: <https://yih.hr/system/publication/document/1/Inkluzivno-sje%C4%87anje-Preporuke.pdf>.
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- 5 Martin Kramer, “Films: Après la Guerre,” Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 8 (2001), p. 88, in Oren Barak, “Don’t mention the war” The Politics of Remembrance and Forgetfulness in Postwar Lebanon,” Middle East Journal, Vol. 61, No.1 (Winter, 2007), pp. 49–70.
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- 12 According to Yáñez and Blanco, the return began in 1991 and lasted until 2009. María Sol Yáñez and Amalio Blanco: Memoria, justicia y verdad en la masacre de El Mozote. Estudios Centroamericanos Journal (ECA) Volume 75 Number 761 Year 2020, p. 32.



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