

SUPPORTING TRUTH, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION IN COLOMBIA

CONSORTIUM PARTNERS: Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG), International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC)

TIME FRAME: October 2017 – March 2024

BACKGROUND

The conflict in Colombia claimed the lives of over 200,000 people between 1958-2013. To help those affected, and begin to bridge historic divides in the country, in 2016 - against the backdrop of ongoing peace negotiations in Colombia - the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR) conducted an assessment of the mechanisms being proposed in the peace talks and concluded that they failed to significantly address victims' needs related to truth, justice and reconciliation, particularly in relation to providing justice and support to Families of Missing and Disappeared Persons (MDPs).

The GIJTR's findings, supported by its work in other contexts such as Sri Lanka, recommended that alongside formal mechanisms, local truth-telling programs be established through which ordinary Colombians could share their experiences of the past and begin to rebuild their communities. Without such grassroots activity, there was a significant risk that broad swaths of the country - particularly marginalized communities, including youth, women, indigenous groups, families of MDPs and survivors of conflict - would not be able to share and heal from their experiences, leaving open wounds to fester and old divisions to harden. To support this mission, through this project the GIJTR has worked to amplify the experiences of these communities and to connect them directly with the Colombian Truth Commission and its legacy, which formally began on November 29, 2018 and closed in 2022. The GIJTR also advised the Commission on the best tools for collecting, documenting and sharing the stories of the conflict's survivors - an integral step to ensuring lasting peace in the country.



GIJTR-sponsored truth-telling projects in Colombia

OBJECTIVES

- Support Colombia's non-judicial transitional justice mechanisms — the Truth Commission (TC), the Search Unit, and the civil society organizations (CSOs) working with them — by ensuring that CSO documentation meets international standards and is useful not only to current transitional justice investigations, but also to future justice and accountability proceedings, including support to the development of strategies for the Truth Commission and Search Unit to sustain their own archives for future peacebuilding, memorialization and atrocity prevention;
- Bolster the capacities of CSOs and communities to design locally led and culturally appropriate materials and activities to raise awareness about the Truth Commission and the Search Unit, and to engage communities in intergenerational dialogue and collective narratives, with a special focus on rural and ethnic communities, so that all Colombians can have a role in shaping the country's future;
- Facilitate dialogue between the Truth Commission, civil society and government institutions about the uses of the Commission's documentation and about the establishment of a citizen follow-up committee to oversee the future implementation of the TC's recommendations to ensure their sustainability;
- Help break cycles of violence and establish a culture that respects justice and human rights by enhancing the capacity of local CSOs in the areas of acknowledgment, reconciliation, non-repetition and enforced disappearance by providing opportunities for exchange of experiences with other Latin American CSOs; and
- Strengthen the capacities of CSOs working in outlying regions of Colombia to advocate on behalf of families of the disappeared and to monitor initiatives undertaken for search, recovery and identification of victims, which can foster healing and reconciliation.



A participatory training workshop facilitated by the GIJTR in Colombia

PROJECT ACTIVITIES TO DATE

- **Establishing Non-Judicial Transitional Justice Mechanisms:** The GIJTR supported the establishment of the Truth Commission and the Search Unit by developing recommendations and methodologies that included participatory processes to ensure all Colombians, particularly marginalized groups, are included and invested in the country's transitional justice measures — a necessary condition to prevent a recurrence of violence and sustain peace.
- **Enhancing the Truth Commission's Documentation:** Responding to the Truth Commission's limited timeframe, the GIJTR and experts from member sites of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) developed recommendations to improve access to government and civil society archives, and assist those managing the archives in efficiently delivering information to the Truth Commission, eliminating unnecessary obstacles that could have hampered the TC's effectiveness and ability to address survivors' needs in a timely manner.
- **Building the Capacity of CSOs:** The GIJTR conducted 11 extensive trainings with 131 civil society organizations in the areas of documentation, forensic techniques, community truth-telling and

memorialization to bolster the country's capacity to document human rights violations that occurred during the conflict and forge programs that promote accountability and reconciliation.

- **Improving the Truth Commission's Outreach to Outlying Regions:** The GIJTR, in coordination with the Truth Commission, hosted a workshop for 12 community leaders representing grassroots organizations across different regions, ethnic populations, gender and age groups. Participants were trained to develop and implement awareness-raising programs on transitional justice mechanisms for local communities so that ordinary Colombians understand the process and how they can participate.
- **Supporting CSOs for Community-Based Truth-Telling:** After undergoing training on truth-telling mechanisms —which offer survivors intimate opportunities to share their individual stories in ways that can foster personal and communal healing — nineteen CSOs working with local communities received financial and technical support for the development and implementation of three-month awareness-raising projects. The GIJTR also published a toolkit detailing the methodologies behind the projects that was used throughout Colombia by the Truth Commission to promote community truth-telling.
- **Facilitating Specialized Workshops on Identification Techniques in the Search for MDPs:** From 2018 to 2021, the GIJTR's Guatemalan partner, the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala, developed a specialized training in FAFG's Genetic and Osteological labs in Guatemala for more than 50 CSOs who work closely with families of the Missing and Disappeared in forensic techniques, including victim documentation and investigation, forensic archaeology, forensic anthropology, and genetics, to improve their ability to provide technical and emotional support to their communities.
- **Trainings with Families in Regions Across Colombia on the Application of Forensic Sciences in the Search of the Disappeared:** Further regional capacity building with families and their organizations was developed from 2018 to 2021 through workshops in five key regions in Colombia, with over 350 participants. Most participants were relatives of the MDPs, who are affiliated or work with CSOs to continue the search for MDPs. Participants also represented diverse organizations; more than 100 local, regional and national organizations were represented in the workshops.
- **Trainings with CSOs to Establish and Maintain Oral Archives:** The GIJTR facilitated a training for 20 CSOs on the development of oral archives, which are an essential tool for preserving the experiences of rural, elderly and illiterate populations. Based on the findings of this workshop and on the technical advice of regional experts, a toolkit on procedures to set up an oral archive was also created.
- **Strengthening of CSO Archives and Supporting the Preparation of Documentation Packages for the Truth Commission:** Seven CSOs identified by the Truth Commission received financial support and technical advice from the GIJTR on preparing documentation to the Truth Commission. A document of best practices in organizing CSO archives was also produced to complement the toolkit on oral archives.
- **Developing a Joint Strategy for a Digital Repository for CSOs:** The GIJTR established and continues to support a working group composed of twelve CSOs with relevant digital documentation experience to develop, with the support of international experts, a CSO-led digital repository of human rights archives that will provide safe and easy access to documentation related to human rights violations in Colombia for generations to come.



A community mural sponsored by the GIJTR in Guacoche

- **Developing community led documentary podcasts on stories of resilience:** Eight community groups received training on storytelling in podcast documentary formats and received financial and technical support to develop their own narratives of stories of resilience with testimonies of their communities. A toolkit on basic techniques for the creation of documentary podcasts was produced in Spanish, English and French to replicate the experience by communities across the Global South.
- **Production and broadcasting of short radio programs on life stories of survivors:** A mainstream radio station with a target audience of educated urban audiences was commissioned to produce short radio clips with life stories of survivors of the armed conflict. Due to its success, the series initially planned for 50 episodes to be broadcast 3 times each was extended to 70 episodes, each being broadcast 4 times and available also in Soundcloud, reaching an audience of over 200,000 listeners in 170 countries.
- **Latin American exchange on the legacies of truth commissions:** A conference on the challenges for the preservation and public access to the legacies of truth commissions brought together over a dozen experiences in the Latin America region to help a group of nearly 40 Colombian CSOs develop strategies for the social appropriation of the legacy of the commission.
- **Developing community memorialization initiatives based on intergenerational dialogue:** Nine rural communities belonging to the Colombian Network of Sites of Memory – RCLM - developed intergenerational dialogue memorialization initiatives. The process strengthened the capacities of the RCLM to develop joint projects.

KEY IMPACT TO DATE

- **Development of Effective Documentation Strategies for Truth-Seeking:** Through training provided by the GIJTR and its global networks, the Truth Commission was able to develop more effective documentation strategies related to both official archives and civil society organizations. The GIJTR also assessed the needs of relevant CSOs and supported them in effectively and efficiently preparing documentation for the Truth Commission.
- **Establishment of Local Truth-Telling Projects:** The GIJTR provided financial and programmatic support to 19 local CSOs to create replicable pilot projects in their communities designed to collect the experiences of everyday Colombians during the war through a variety of art-based projects, including community murals, doll-making, and weaving groups. These projects help to break taboos around speaking about the war — a significant problem in Colombia, as in many post-conflict settings that can lead to a recurrence of violence. These projects responded to the need for increasing support for local capacities among indigenous, peasant and Afro-Colombian communities to develop autonomous initiatives for truth-telling.



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CREATING CHANNELS OF TRUST: Community Truth-Telling in Outlying Regions in Colombia

A Toolkit by Darío Colmenares Millán

- **Best Practices Shared Through Toolkit on Community Truth-Telling Projects in Outlying Regions in Colombia:** Drawing from the experiences of the community truth-telling projects described above, a toolkit in Spanish and English was developed outlining the different methodologies and projects implemented in an accessible manner so that they can be easily replicated by CSOs looking to conduct similar projects in their communities. Distributed by the Truth Commission, the GIJTR and CSOs throughout Colombia, the toolkit ensures that the impact of the initial truth-telling projects continues to grow as the projects are duplicated by CSOs throughout the country over time.
- **Development of Toolkits on Best Archival Practices and on the Development of Oral Archives:** In order to share more broadly its expertise in the creation and preservation of archives, the GIJTR published and distributed a toolkit of best practices, focusing on procedures CSOs can take to organize their archives to facilitate accessibility and sustainability. Additionally, after completing the training on oral archiving described above, the GIJTR completed and shared a toolkit on procedures and techniques for CSOs to develop oral archives that offers practical information on cataloging and preservation techniques, methods for interviewing, and procedures for informed consent, among other topics. These two toolkits will be merged into a general manual for CSOs in archival techniques, to be distributed across all GIJTR networks.
- **Creation of a Working Group of CSOs with Relevant Human Rights Archives for the Development of a Joint Repository:** Through regular meetings with international experts on archival techniques, the GIJTR supported the creation of a working group for CSOs committed to the development of a joint digital repository of archives focusing on human rights abuses against advocates and activists across Colombia. The documentation will strengthen the capacities of civil society to continue to document, conduct research and raise awareness on human rights violations against these groups, particularly in rural Colombia.
- **Establishment of a Strong Partnership with Colombia's Truth Commission:** The strength of the GIJTR's contribution in Colombia and elsewhere lies in its interdisciplinary strategy for understanding and addressing transitional justice from multiple standpoints, including forensics, memorialization, community-led advocacy and programming. After recognizing the important contribution of the GIJTR to their mandate, the Truth Commission designated three Commissioners as interlocutors with the GIJTR's project in Colombia, focusing on social participation, archives and documentation to expand its impact in the country.
- **Regional Knowledge Exchange:** Given the expertise of GIJTR partner FAFG, which is based in Guatemala, not only have the Truth Commission, Search Unit and CSOs gained a deeper understanding of the uses of forensic sciences in the investigation and documentation of victims, but FAFG has led workshops and trainings for project participants in both Colombia and Guatemala. The tangible forensic knowledge and skills gained by participants, and the links forged among the Colombian participants with their Guatemalan peers, serves as a sustainable network to continue honing best practices.
- **Wide dissemination of life stories of survivors among educated urban audiences:** One of the sectors of the public identified by the Truth Commission as priority for awareness raising was that of educated urban audiences in the main capitals. GIJTR commissioned an elite radio station to produce programs in the language of its regular listeners based on testimonies of survivors of the armed conflict who have actively engaged in peacebuilding. The effectiveness of this awareness raising campaign can be seen in the steady demand for the programs, as evidenced in the analytics data monitored by the radio station.



- **Development of a CSO led oversight committee to ensure public access to the Truth Commission’s documentation and archives:** As a result of trainings on digital human rights archives with CSOs, a citizen oversight group was created and developed an advocacy strategy to ensure that the documentation legacy of the Truth Commission was transferred to the National Archive with protocols to ensure that the Commission and the Archive develop protocols to maximize public access to the extent possible within legal regulations. As a result, the government granted an additional term to these institutions to complete the data transfer with protocols ensuring a policy of maximum access in the future.

UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

To sustain and grow the project, the GIJTR will conduct the following activities:

- Launch a digital repository of archives focusing on human rights abuses, and provide capacity-building trainings to CSOs on the uses of digital repositories to safeguard their information;
- Develop intergenerational dialogue and resilience stories through podcasts, radio programs, and mixed media by offering capacity building trainings, technical assistance, and financial support to community groups;
- Oversee consultative process with CSOs on the preservation of the legacy of the Truth Commission; and
- Host a Latin American Transitional Justice Exchange Conference on reconciliation, non-repetition, accounting for the disappeared, and the role of sites of memory in the preservation of the legacy of truth commissions to share lessons learned from the project with other practitioners.
- Broaden CSO participation in the use of the human rights repository and database developed by GIJTR.
- Develop a technical training program for CSOs to effectively access the documentation legacy of the Truth Commission.
- Support a second season of community led documentary podcasts on stories of resilience.
- Develop exhibitions on the findings and recommendations of the Truth Commission for young audiences in urban centers to supplement the dissemination strategy developed by the Truth Commission with the support of the international community.

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS:

Memoria Abierta (Argentina), IIARS (Guatemala), Movimiento Ciudadano Para Que No Se Repita (Peru), Archivo Historico° de la Policia Nacional de Guatemala, National Security Archives (US), Parque por la Paz de Villa Grimaldi, Centro de la Memoria Monsenor Gerardi, Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos de Santiago de Chile.

Asfaddes Barrancabermeja, Guacoche Community Council, Pueblo Bello - Remanso de Paz Museum, Comite de Memoria de El Castillo, Tras las Huellas de El Placer Museum, Fuerza Mujeres Way6u, Mariposas de Alas Nuevas Construyendo Futuro, Valle; MOVICE, Valle; Comite de Derechos Humanos del Meta; Observatorio Surcolombiano de Derechos Humanos, Huila; Comite de Solidaridad con Presos Politicos, ACADESAN; ANMUCIC; A Luchar; Cabildo La Chorrera, Amazonas; Ascoba, Choco; Museo Itinerante de los Montes de Maria, Bolivar; Comunidad de Algeciras, Huila; Palenque de San Basilio, Bolivar; Tangui, Choco; Cabildo de Yunguillo, Putumayo; and Guapi, Cauca.

Comision Internacional de Juristas, Colectivo de Abogados Jose Alvear Restrepo, Comision Colombiana de Juristas, Dejusticia, DHColombia, Fundacion Ideas para la Paz, Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes. ACOSAF, AFAVIL, Asociacion de Consejos Comunitarios del Norte del Cauca (ACONC), Asociacion de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (ASFADDES), Asociacion de Mujeres Desplazadas y Victimas Ubicadas en el Municipio de Santa Rosa del Sur (ASMUDEVICSAR), Asociacion de Victimas de Crimenes del Estado - Magdalena Medio (ASORVIMM), Asociacion para la Investigacion y la Accion Social -NOMADESC, Asociacion por el Desarrollo Social -ASOVIDA, AVIPES, Caminos de Esperanza, Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (CEBs), Corporacion de Desarrollo Regional (CDR), Centro de Investigacion y Educacion Popular/ Programa por la Paz (Cinep/PPP), Corporacion Juridica Libertad (CJL), Colectivo 16 de Mayo, Colectivo Socio Juridico Orlando Fals Borda, Comite Civico de Derechos Humanos del Meta, Comite Civico Derechos Humanos, Consejo Regional Indigena del Cauca (CRIC), Corocoras del Llano, Corporacion Claretiana Norman Perez Bello, Corporacion Construyendo Poder, Democracia y Paz (PODERPAZ), Corporacion Region, Corporacion Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS), COSAF, DH Colombia, Familiares D.F., Fundacion por la defensa de DDHH y DIH en el Oriente y Centro de Colombia (DHOC), Fundacion Espacios de Convivencia y Desarrollo Social (FUNDESCODES), Fundacion Guagua Galeria Tiberio Fernandez, Fundacion Luz de Esperanza, Fundacion Madre Laura H., Asociacion Gente Emprendedora (GEMPREN), Grupo Interdisciplinario por los Derechos Humanos (GIDH), Iglesia Evangelica Luterana de Colombia (IELCO), Madres de la Candelaria, Madres Por La Vida, Memoria Mujer, Mesa de Desaparicion Forzada Narifio, Mesa Victimas ORVIDA ANORI, Movimiento Social por la Vida y la Defensa del Territorio (MOVETE), Movimiento Nacional de Crimenes de Estado (MOVICE) , Mujeres Caminando Por la Verdad y la Justicia, Fundacion Nydia Erika Bautista, Organizacion Regional Indigena del Valle del Cauca (ORIVAC), Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN), Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio (PDPMM), Proyecto Desaparecidos MMPEV, Red Academica de Movilidad (RAM), Ruta Pacifico Q.S., Tejiendo Memorias, Indepaz, Colectiva Normal, La No Ficción, Emisora Javeriana, Red Colombiana de Lugares de Memoria, Fundación Guagua.



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