

# THE FORENSIC ACADEMY: BUILDING CAPACITY TO SUPPORT FAMILIES OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

**CONSORTIUM PARTNERS:** Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (FAFG), International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC)

**TIME FRAME:** May 2018 to March 2024



Participants in Forensic Academy I

## PROJECT DETAILS

Locating and identifying Missing and Disappeared Persons lost in conflict is a central component of transitional justice processes across the globe, and particularly in the global South. Not only can these findings provide evidence in accountability proceedings, but they can offer families opportunities to properly mourn their loved lost ones and begin to heal.

To support this process, the GIJTR's Forensic Academy builds the technical capacity of CSOs from Africa, Asia and the MENA region in the area of forensics investigations and provides a holistic framework for supporting and meeting the specific needs of families of victims. While always considering diverse, local needs and providing context-specific training, the Forensic Academy grounds its trainings in international best practices, and complements its core forensic work by sharing experiences and lessons learned related to psychosocial support, community memorialization and truth-telling activities to support families' advocacy, the search for the disappeared, and public awareness.

Through training sessions, grants and technical support to participants, the Forensic Academy offers a multidisciplinary approach and bolsters knowledge-sharing and local capacity across regions, particularly for participants from countries in the global South who are struggling with unaddressed human right violations or are currently in transitional justice processes.

## OBJECTIVES

1. Increase the ability of South-based activists, academics and practitioners to understand and use forensics tools to locate and identify the disappeared, with a focus on participatory and holistic interventions, to promote healing and reconciliation in conflict and post-conflict settings;
2. Establish and support a community-driven network of South-based activists, academics and practitioners working on issues related to disappeared persons, to support knowledge sharing and bolster advocacy efforts;
3. Support participants to undertake community-based projects related to disappeared persons, which can support healing among affected families and help rebuild the social fabric; and
4. Establish a mentor-mentee relationship between current Academy participants and past cohorts to support network building and the sustainable sharing of lessons learned.

## KEY ACTIVITIES TO DATE

- **Forensic Academy I and III:** Twenty three CSO representatives from Africa, Asia and the MENA region participated in the first Forensic Academy, which consisted of two intensive training sessions. The first, a fourteen-day introductory course held in Guatemala, equipped participants with a comprehensive understanding of the mechanics and science behind forensics. The session also enabled participants to launch GIJTR-supported projects in their home countries related to forensics, which is discussed in more detail below. The second training session focused on psychosocial support for families of the disappeared, memorializing disappearances, and truth-telling opportunities for families – which can help bridge old divides and foster empathy and social cohesion. This five-day workshop was held in Rwanda to engage with another context and connect with a more recent transitional justice process than that in Guatemala. The second workshop took place after participants concluded their small project implementation and included opportunities to discuss the successes and challenges of their projects and develop a plan for sustaining them and continuing to support one another. Participants also exchanged experiences with their Rwandan counterparts regarding addressing disappearances and ways in which CSOs can engage in this process from the very beginning.
- **Virtual Forensic Academy II:** With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the GIJTR adopted a virtual curriculum for the second Forensic Academy that is currently offering sixteen participants from Africa, Asia and the MENA region intensive capacity-building trainings through accessible online courses. As in the first Academy, the comprehensive program includes sessions on identification context, forensic systems for human identification of disappeared or missing persons, investigation and documentation of victims, forensic archaeology, forensic anthropology, forensic genetics, identification confirmation, useful information for identifications, treatment of unidentified bodies, notifications and inhumation. The online modules also include trainings focused on psychosocial support for families of the disappeared and trauma-informed information gathering, and the role of truth-telling and memorialization activities in advocacy and broader healing. While travel and in-person knowledge sharing is not possible during the pandemic, past and current Forensic Academy participants have been introduced virtually, growing an existing global South-based forensics network.



Participants in Forensic Academy I

- **Implementation of Small Projects:** All Forensic Academy participants receive stipends from the GIJTR to undertake their own in-country, multi-disciplinary projects so they can acquire hands-on experience in managing and implementing projects related to forensics. Participants receive virtual technical assistance from the GIJTR to support the project's development, and, participants in the Forensic Academy II also receive virtual or local assistance from a mentor from the first Forensic Academy cohort. Projects have included actual exhumations, mapping of mass graves, collecting testimonies of families, and advocacy initiatives and memorialization programs, each providing tangible benefits to a post-conflict community.

## KEY IMPACT TO DATE

- **Creation of a Regional Forensics Network:** The GIJTR's Forensic Academy embodies a holistic and interdisciplinary approach, building the capacity of a core group of experts equipped to serve as a resource for other practitioners and as individual experts to support in-country transitional justice activities as they relate to truth-telling and forensics. This fulfills an urgent need, particularly in the global South, where the subject of enforced disappearances is often ignored by state officials, which causes immense pain to families of the missing and disappeared and provides fertile ground for old resentments to ferment and grow into violence. GIJTR's forensics network between the all Forensic Academy participants provides a counter to this silence, a platform for an exchange of experiences with a range of stakeholders, including technical forensics experts, family members, prosecutors, and legal and psychosocial support advocates.
- **Development of Sustainable Community Projects Related to Forensics:** Through GIJTR grants, all Forensic Academy participants produce a community-based project designed to address the needs of those affected by enforced disappearances. This local ownership inherent in the program framework ensures the sustainability of the program, as GIJTR's experiences in many contexts have shown that when a community is intimately connected to a project, they are more invested in its long-term outcome. Sustainability is reinforced by the forging of partnerships among participants and technical experts, as well as among participants themselves, to share knowledge and expertise and work together to support ongoing processes of truth-telling in conflict and post-conflict contexts. At the end of each project, the GIJTR evaluates all the projects based on the impact created, the persons reached, the approaches endeavored, and what could have been improved – all lessons that are integrated into the granting processes for future academies to ensure maximum impact.

## UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

- **Implementation and Evaluation of Community-Based Projects for the Forensic Academy III:** Eight participants from Africa, Asia and the MENA region implemented their small projects, with support from the GIJTR and mentors from past Forensic Academy cohorts. Upon completion, the GIJTR evaluated each project's impact and will apply lessons learned to future Forensic Academies.
- **Intensive Review Training Workshop:** A detailed training reviewing the course concepts and further discussion of topics such as identification processes, osteology, anatomy, forensic archaeology, exhumations, DNA sample collection, psychosocial support, memorialization, truth-telling and working with the families will be developed online as long as the COVID-19 travel restrictions remain in place. This intensive workshop will also include monitoring and evaluation of the program, with a detailed revision of the processes and outcomes of each one of the 16 in-country projects.
- **Training Forensic Academy IV and V Cohorts:** Partners will convene participants from Forensic Academy IV and V cohorts for upcoming intensive capacity building trainings in Guatemala and Rwanda.



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