

# FORENSIC ACADEMY RESEARCH FINDINGS



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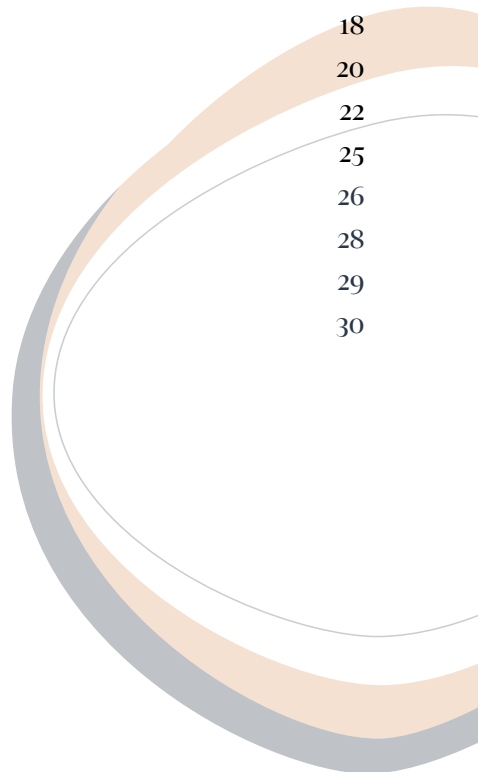
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# CONTENTS

Executive summary	1
Introduction	2
Context	4
Methodology	6
Thematic analysis	8
Hope	9
Connection and humanization	10
Justice	11
Mental health and psychosocial support	14
Logistical and structural challenges	18
Practical implications and application	20
Primary lessons and recommendations	22
Discussion	25
Conclusion	26
References	28
Endnotes	29
About the partners	30



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Forensic Academy (FA) is a project created by Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala in partnership with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr). The FA is a training program intended to educate and empower South-based activists and practitioners who work in the field of enforced disappearances. The training consists of an online self-paced program and in-person capacity-building workshops in Guatemala and Rwanda, where participants gain direct experience in applying forensic anthropology, archaeology, and genetics to identify the remains of people who are victims of political conflict and return them to their families, with a strong focus on developing participatory and holistic interventions.

This report contains the results of a research study conducted by CSVr to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the FA to inform future academies. Data for the research study was collected through focus groups with participants and mentors of past FAs, interviews with CSVr, who facilitated the FAs, and project documents including reports, evaluations, and participant project proposals.

The research study found that the FA has had a significant impact on the participants and facilitators of the project. Participants emphasized the value of the practical skills they learned through the workshops, as well as the meaningful interactions they had with the families of the disappeared. In reviewing the data, five core themes were found throughout: hope, connection and humanization, justice, mental health and psychosocial support, and logistical and structural challenges.

# INTRODUCTION

The Forensic Training Program: Building Capacity to Address the Right of Families of Enforced Disappearances, or Forensic Academy (FA), aims to empower activists, academics, and practitioners to create and implement forensic investigations and support programs within their own countries. Through in-person and online capacity-building opportunities and grant funding, the FA supports families and community members of enforced disappearance in their countries, while providing participants with a holistic framework for supporting and meeting the specific needs of victims' families. The FA is a Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR) project led by the Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (FAFG) in partnership with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR).

The three primary objectives of the FA are:

1. Increase South-based activists', academics' and practitioners' knowledge of forensic tools to locate and identify the disappeared, with a focus on participatory and holistic interventions;
2. Establish and support a community-driven network of South-based activists, academics and practitioners working on issues related to disappeared persons;
3. Support participants to undertake community-based projects related to disappeared persons.

## Project description

The FAFG, as part of the GIJTR, proposed a multidisciplinary FA that aims to support and build the technical capacity of civil society organisation (CSO) representatives in the area of forensic investigations as well as provide a holistic framework for supporting and meeting the specific needs of families of victims. In considering diverse local needs and the importance of providing context-specific training, the FA aimed to apply international best practices, rooted in the local experience of partners and participants. Based on the Guatemalan experience and drawing on FAFG's forensic capacity built over 25 years, together with the ICSC's and the CSVJ's expertise and experience working internationally, the FA aimed to provide a learning platform for participants and partners to share experiences and best practices on using forensics, psychosocial support and community memorialization and truth-telling activities to support families' search for their disappeared loved ones as well as contribute to their wellbeing.

Civil society representatives, lawyers, forensic experts, public prosecutors, families of the disappeared and even survivors are all key players who, with the right knowledge and insight, can advocate for families' right to truth and propel forensic investigations forward. However, the capacity and knowledge of how best to proceed with investigations and support families is not always readily available, because there are limited spaces for networking and learning from other forensic experts with experience in the area. The FA was based in Guatemala and played an important role in bolstering knowledge-sharing and building local capacity across regions, particularly for participants from countries in the global South who are struggling with unaddressed human right violations or currently in transitional justice processes.

# CONTEXT

Enforced disappearances continue to be a global problem. The United Nations defines enforced disappearances as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.”<sup>1</sup>

Enforced disappearance is frequently used by oppressive regimes as a tool of terror and control. The people who have been abducted may experience torture, confinement, and other harsh methods of physical and psychological violence before meeting their deaths at the hands of their captors. Family and community members may experience the paralyzing fear of not knowing where their loved one is or what has happened to them. This may lead to a state of ambiguous grief or loss and result in experiences of depression, anxiety, powerlessness, guilt, and the inability to mourn, amongst other forms of distress.<sup>2</sup>

Even for years after a regime has fallen and disappearances have stopped, families and communities are left without answers and still stuck wondering what happened to their loved ones. Additionally, state-based organs may try to conceal the evidence of enforced disappearances by criminalizing the investigation of mass graves or creating other barriers to forensic investigations. It is against this backdrop of the histories of violence and resistance to accountability and truth-telling that the work of the FA is all the more important.

At the time of compiling this report, four phases of the project had been completed and the fifth phase was underway. This report contains the results of an investigation into the outcomes of the FA thus far and includes key recommendations and lessons learned for others working with victims of enforced disappearance and the provision of support to the families of the missing and the disappeared.



Participants of FAIV touring the FAFG Laboratory and undertaking DNA sampling and storing activities as part of the Forensic Academy training



# METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative research design which comprised focus group discussions, individual interviews with a semi-structured interview schedule, as well as an online survey with open-ended questions. The data collection process took place virtually due to the diverse locations and time zones where the research participants were situated.

Researchers conducted focus group discussions with FA participants and mentors, interviews with select facilitators, and surveys were disseminated for data collection. Additionally, researchers analyzed reports consisting of documents from FA I through III, and an interim report from FA IV. Following data collection, the data was systematized and analyzed with the intention of addressing the following questions:

- What does FA teach us about current best practices in supporting those affected by enforced disappearance?
- What were the successes and limitations of the projects?
- How did the small projects fare in their respective intended outcomes?
- How effective was the FA in achieving its intended outcome? How did this change over time and within each individual academy? Explain. And if it did not change, why not?
- What were the overlapping themes between projects and phases?

The focus groups consisted of four participants and three mentors, with two people attending focus groups for both roles. The participants and mentors were from Syria, The Gambia, the Philippines, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Three project facilitators were interviewed, all of whom are current or former CSVr employees who have been involved in these FA projects over the years. The facilitators were responsible for mental health support for participants and debriefing after difficult content and experiences. Their contributions allowed researchers to draw insights across FA I to FA IV, with a focus on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed for the purposes of thematic analysis. Limitations regarding available data and data collection will be addressed in the “Discussion” section. Researchers were unable to adequately answer all the intended questions due to these limitations and believe a follow-up study may be of value.



Simulated archaeological activity at the Memorial of San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala

# THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The researchers utilized thematic analysis to identify patterns and common themes to answer the research questions. Project documents and transcripts of focus groups and interviews were used in the analysis. Below is a review of the major themes that emerged.

**Figure 1:** The thematic areas that emerged for participants during their experience in the various iterations of the FA



## Hope

The researchers define hope as “Positive, action-oriented expectation that a positive future goal or outcome is possible and, similarly, a thinking process that taps a sense of agency, or will, and the awareness of the steps necessary to achieve one’s goals.”<sup>3</sup>

Across all phases, hope was a prominent theme that emerged as an outcome of participation in the activities of the FA. It included hope for providing support to affected communities in their own countries and hope for a more positive future. One participant stated, “*It made me look forward to future Syria... and made me want to continue what I’m doing.*”

Participants discussed the hope that families of the disappeared still have. This was not restricted to a hope of finding their loved ones alive, but more often hope of being able to bury their loved ones with dignity and finally get a sense of closure. This resilient hope in the face of intense loss and the pain of ambiguous grief was inspiring to several participants, one of whom said: “*Hope changes everything, and I think this applies not only [to] Lebanon or Nigeria or my country. It applies to every other country... they can find the courage to move on, no matter what the outcomes are.*” This alludes to how people who have experienced gross human rights violations, and carried the psychosocial burden of enforced disappearance, are able to continue making meaning of both the violence and the loss. It emerged that the sense of hope is not an individualized sense of hope, but rather a hope embedded in a sense of community and honor for lives lost and those who remain.

## Connection and humanization

Embedded in the FA ethos and work is a human- and family-centered focus. When asked about their biggest takeaways, one participant stated, *“So, for me my biggest takeaway from the Academy was we need to put people at the heart of what we do, and it has to be natural to connect with you [interested parties in this field of work, such as friends and families of the disappeared] as well. And trust... you trust that they are making that difficult journey of closure by trying to find their missing ones with people that care about them.”* This highlights the project’s aim to restore a sense of dignity to people who have experienced gross human rights violations, with the key objective of facilitating collective healing of family members of the disappeared. Furthermore, a review of in-country proposals and reports found a continuation of this theme.

Many of the participants’ projects focused on documentation of stories and memorialization processes. These were aimed at humanizing the bereaved and addressing ambiguous grief even if the infrastructure, experience, and funding were not in place to complete formal forensic investigations into the disappeared. The project report by a participant based in the Philippines stated,

*“ This project is very important and timely, not only because families of victims have been requesting for a documentation mission for some time now, but especially because there is an urgent need to gather all available stories about the atrocities during Martial Law now that there is a widespread and systematic attempt to distort history by spreading lies and disinformation, by the Marcos family, who unfortunately are back in power with the election as President of the dictator’s son in the May 2022 polls. ”*

The project focused on collecting stories of both survivors and families of the disappeared.

Participants reported that connecting with the families of the disappeared was a profoundly impactful experience. They also emphasized the importance of being able to connect with each other. Building camaraderie and a support network during the workshops was another major takeaway. This was noticeably absent in FA II, which had no in-person workshops due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was more difficult to connect with other participants in an online format, with people feeling more “detached” from their peers. Having in-person connections was identified as important to participants. In response to the pandemic, FAFG and partners selected excellent participants from FA II to be mentors in FA III to take part in in-person activities. Further, during the pandemic, partners continued to utilize improved capacities in virtual programming by holding the trainings online. Partners continued to monitor the Covid-19 situation in each country of focus and the host country of the proposed international travel for the regional meetings planned to take place in FA III.

*“ It actually helped me to feel that I belong, that I am not alone... And that helps to build that global solidarity, I felt in solidarity with others in the sharing of experiences that was useful for me. Because sometimes you struggle, you lose energy... but when you listen to people keeping hope alive in other countries and the situations, you feel energized; that is what I took away from especially in the session in Guatemala. ”<sup>4</sup>*

This excerpt highlights the impact of the FA on participants in postconflict areas in terms of capacity-building and fostering a sense of connectedness.

## **Justice**

One of the guidelines for participant projects was to outline how it contributes to transitional justice. Transitional justice is characterized by five pillars: truth, justice, reparation, memorialization, and guarantees of non-recurrence.<sup>5</sup> In the project proposal outlines, participants had to answer the question, “How will this project strengthen community participation in a forensic or transitional

justice process, either formal or informal?” As such, insights into justice were a pertinent and recurring theme.

The successful integration of transitional justice in participant projects was in part dependent on the participants’ home countries. Countries that are active conflict zones or have governments that still deny the occurrence of enforced disappearances and refuse accountability have less possibility for formal, state-led transitional justice mechanisms. However, it was still an important aspect of the projects despite the countries’ current political status.

Justice was more often framed as getting closure for the families of the disappeared rather than holding those responsible accountable or seeking action against them. One project proposal stated,

*“ According to a survey we conducted in 2017 with victims, 80% want to get the truth about what really happened during painful events, but their real struggle is to recover the remains of their loved ones and finally to mourn. In this we will say that this project contributes to transitional justice because these actions contribute to the truth and inner peace of families. ”*

Hence, while there is a need for transitional justice, there is also a recognition that integrating collective healing within the process is a key component.

Most projects recognized the parameters of their scope and set goals for justice within the limitations of their country’s political climate. They did not seek wide-scale government accountability or restitution. Their main goals were to give families closure and the chance to finally be able to bury their loved ones. Justice was fundamentally tied to healing. One participant stated:

*“ With this project, the community will also be able to reflect on their experience which may also lead to their collective healing of their hurts and pains, thereby strengthening community participation in*

*the journey for justice... This is part of the nation's story whose people suffered during Martial Law. Their story may ignite other communities to also tell their stories. In that way the people could tell 'this is our history.' For now, achieving justice may be difficult. What is important is we have the documents and stories to tell. For sure these documents and stories can help in achieving justice in the future. ”*

The participant's contribution provides insight into the significance of memorialization and truth-telling in its different forms as a key process for people who have faced atrocities to retain a sense of autonomy in their healing and transitional justice process.



Fredy Peccerelli, Executive Director of FAFG, welcoming the participants of FAIV to the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda



## Mental health and psychosocial support

The theme of MHPSS arose in several different ways throughout the FAs. First, from a practical standpoint – there was a repeated call for greater MHPSS focus during the FA workshops and curriculum from both facilitators and participants. Second, with respect to where mental health and trauma fits in the larger context of enforced disappearances and the mental health impact that violence has on the families of the disappeared, and their broader communities.

When asked about the limitations of the FA, a common response across interviews and focus groups was a need for a broader integration of MHPSS. Participants were learning and exposed to difficult material, much of which resonated with their own experiences and trauma, and it was reported that the program would have benefited from more debriefing opportunities. One contributor said: *“It was a lot of overwhelming experiences in a short period of time, and I think it may have been a bit too much for people, because you could see slowly over the days people are quieter and quieter... we didn’t have time to process each experience properly.”*

Based on the nature of the project, the workshop placed a key focus on the forensic science processes and psychosocial support may not have been adequately prioritized. In response, FA III and IV integrated MHPSS strategies and tools for practitioners, with increased debriefing sessions led by CSV. At the second workshop in Rwanda during FA IV, partners made it clear that private MHPSS debriefings were available as needed, and the MHPSS practitioner from CSV led group debriefings as well as workshops integrating the importance of mental health and wellbeing into the work of the FA.

This was a prominent theme, as other participants in this study echoed this concern: *“I would appreciate if there would be more sessions for psychosocial support... some of the discussions were really heavy and so it would be nice if there would be in between sessions where we could debrief... it would be great*

*if the tour to the memorial sites were not done at the end of... the experience because we... would be left alone during our flight thinking of everything that we saw. So, just a shuffling of the schedule and addition of psychosocial sessions.”*

Again, in response, partners rearranged the schedule of the workshop in Rwanda during FA IV to include site visits to memorials in the middle of the week to allow time for debriefing and processing for participants. Partners wished to respond to the needs of the participants holistically and provide them with adequate support during workshops.



Participants of FAIV undertaking the simulated archaeological dig at the Memorial of San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala

The participants reflected on their experiences from FA II and FA III. However, in FA IV, greater emphasis was reportedly placed on psychosocial support and debriefing. A facilitator involved in FA IV highlighted that the FA is embarking on a more trauma-informed approach to the project. Once FA IV concludes, it would be beneficial to explore some of the psychosocial support needs and review how these can be enhanced in the next phase.

Amongst the strengths of the FA program is that while it is structured for capacity-building, it is responsive to the emerging needs of participants. As such, the various academies highlight a spectrum of needs, particularly due to the diverse contexts and cultures of the participants. With regards to a more succinct integration of MHPSS, the FA has responded to the practical needs that form part of the objectives, as well as placing further emphasis on the needs that emerge as each phase of the program evolves.

Integrating a trauma-informed approach has included scheduling workshops that cover key areas of psychosocial wellbeing for participants as active practitioners in conflict and postconflict zones. The FA has considered the mental health and psychosocial needs that are often underrecognized in the human rights space, for various actors who run organizations that are operational in contexts where violence and other gross human rights violations have been perpetrated. This has equipped CSO representatives to consider their psychosocial wellbeing as they continue their work implementing their projects. It further capacitates participants with the knowledge and resources to be able to identify trauma responses that are often inevitable and support their beneficiaries in ways that mitigate (re)traumatization, triggering, as well as ongoing distress that is persistent where families and communities have experienced large-scale ambiguous loss.

The trauma-informed approach has also cultivated a continuous awareness of the emotional sensitivities that human rights and violence-centered work evokes. Across the phases, the program thus facilitated ongoing consultation with MHPSS practitioners as well as MHPSS-centered literature to enhance

knowledge that is easily contextualized and made practical. Outside the context of the workshops, the theme of MHPSS was woven throughout participants' projects in their own countries. Some projects had their goal and focus to be providing psychosocial support to families of the disappeared within the domain of healing from histories of trauma, which further incorporated memorialization and story documentation processes.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that enforced disappearances often lead to ambiguous grief and this grief differs in experience and presentation from the grief that comes with a known and concrete loss. Ambiguous grief or loss is defined by either “a situation in which a person is physically absent but psychologically present in the minds of friends and relatives. In the most severe case, people go missing and are never seen or heard from again, which happens most often in contexts of natural disasters, armed conflicts, or state oppression...” or “when a person is physically present but psychologically absent, as in the case of Alzheimer patients. In both cases, the ambiguity that surrounds the loss causes a range of stressors that ‘freeze’ the grief process and effectively prevent closure.”<sup>6</sup>

In situations where there have been enforced disappearances, the ambiguity of the loss and grief serves as a unique complexity in the healing process. This is significant in collectivistic societies where there is a healing that emerges when families and communities can mourn and grieve openly together and send their loved ones off through their spiritual and cultural rituals. Within the FA, there have been opportunities for participants to share these experiences with families during the inhumation process. This brings a depth of insight into the nature and gravity of violence and enforced disappearances in ways that there is experiential learning that takes place for participants. It further provides insight into the complete process that the FA endeavors to fulfill where families are reunited with their loved ones with the understanding that justice requires a holistic approach that includes an ongoing response to the mental health and psychosocial needs of the people whose lives are significantly impacted through violence and loss.

## Logistical and structural challenges

The logistical challenges across the FA phases were starkly different due to the global impact of Covid-19 and travel restrictions. In FA I, FA III, and FA IV, traveling to Guatemala posed a significant logistical challenge. Many participants were traveling from African and Middle Eastern countries, and getting to Guatemala took several days. Obtaining a Guatemala visa posed significant challenges across all phases as the nation has strict visa policies. Most of this work fell to the FAFG as the host organization within the country. Initially, the researchers questioned whether this was enough of a reason to move the initial training phase to another country. However, it became apparent that the FAFG had both the infrastructure and trained personnel in-country to keep the first in-person training there. However, continuing to work with the foreign affairs and visa offices to obtain the necessary special-status visas will be a necessity for the project's future.

In FA II, Covid was by far the largest obstacle to overcome. There was no in-person component in Guatemala or Rwanda due to travel restrictions and safety concerns, so participants completed an online course. However, some participants were severely limited by poor internet access in their countries: one of the mentors was not able to attend any meetings due to connection issues. However, partners responded by maintaining communications with participants to check in on progress of their small project implementation, utilizing improved capacities in virtual programming. Further, stipends for internet were provided and partners remained flexible in adapting the activities and working with local actors on emerging needs and priorities.

One of the best outcomes of this challenge was the online course being utilized in FA III and FA IV to provide theoretical knowledge to participants prior to their practical and hands-on training. In FA II, partners developed a comprehensive virtual training course that covers the basic theoretical foundations and processes of the forensic multidisciplinary approach, as well

as on MHPSS and enforced disappearances, to actively engage participants throughout the duration of the FA and prepare them to take full advantage of the opportunities and learnings offered at the in-person training sessions. In that sense, selected participants can take advantage of these online resources prior to the immersive in-person practical training in Guatemala in subsequent academies.

The online course is composed of nine modules on topics such as investigation and documentation of victims, forensic anthropology, and forensic genetics. The online course aims to equip participants with theoretical knowledge they can put into practice in FAFG's labs during the intensive training in Guatemala. Each participant is required to complete the online course prior to their participation in the practical.



# PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION

Several participants come from countries where oppressive regimes and/or political instability continue to be significant sources of concern. Many participants' countries of origin are also limited in the infrastructure, financial, and/or sociopolitical support required to develop forensic laboratories to expand on any identification work they have been doing, especially some of the processes they learned about in the FA. One participant from Afghanistan spoke about needing to find a way to share the knowledge he had acquired, especially since his country lacked infrastructure:

*“ They don't have any kind of proper methodology and skills and the tools to work on the incident in Afghanistan. So, this training manual was helpful in terms of finding a proper way, at least to start searching for the disappearance is that we need some kind of support, maybe international support, or internal support. ”*

Community-based projects, through small grant funding, therefore provide an opportunity for participants to share their knowledge and skills gained through the FA, through informational publications or content, with relevant authorities and communities.

The same participant described additional challenges in implementing his work and specifically the impact the political regression had on it. *“Unfortunately, in the fall of Kabul, we, we destroyed our, our database. Oh, we took the*

*information in our hard drives, but we destroyed completely that the database that we worked on it for several years. because our office was open, was mainly in target by the [armed forces]. So later on... they were, they are searching for our office and a document. And finally, so they... found it, some of the materials that we had and then they take it to their police station, and they arrested one of our office colleagues and then finally released him. But, and they said you have to stop this kind of activities.”* This brings to the fore some of the challenges that are encountered when working with gross human rights violations in the form of enforced disappearance and torture. There are significant threats to human rights practitioners which mirror some of the challenges to safety and wellbeing that are outlined in the FA.



Participants of FAIV at the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda



# PRIMARY LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Figure 2: Lessons learned during the Forensic Academy process



The development of the online course for participants to complete prior to the workshop in Guatemala was a major success. Participants in FA II, which was entirely online, still completed their projects and integrated the knowledge they gained through the course. In FA III, the online course was user friendly and effective to the extent that participants iterated that some of the presentations and lectures in the Guatemala in-person component were a repetition of what they learned in the online course. Based on the feedback, a recommendation

for future FAs is to increase the number of practical, hands-on sessions for participants, as those were identified to be the most valuable to their learning.

Several participants recommended establishing a platform for **FA alumni to stay in touch** and update each other on their projects and some of the emerging developments in their various countries. They emphasized how valuable networking with other participants was and are seeking a way to remain connected.

There is also room to improve the way mentors and participants are matched. **Improving the mentor-match process** could involve adding questions to the participant application about their interests for potential projects to better match with mentors' skills and experiences. Another suggestion was to have mentors match with participants from different countries. Gaining exposure to and hearing stories from different contexts was a valuable learning experience for participants, and this would be ideal for the mentors too, offering the opportunity for greater diversity of exposure and experiential learning for both mentors and participants.

A final major recommendation for future FAs is to **increase the integration of MHPSS content in the schedule and curriculum**. Many participants and facilitators emphasized the need for more time for processing the sensitive material and debriefing after difficult experiences, such as exhumations and visiting memorial sites. Integrating MHPSS into the curriculum could include more in-depth discussions of trauma-informed approaches to the small projects, and basic skills for containment and on Psychological First Aid (PFA). These would aim to capacitate participants with more skills to navigate the emotionally intense situations of meeting the families of the disappeared, as well as enhancing self-awareness related to the sensitive nature of engaging with the remains of people who have passed on, as well as self-care and burnout related to working in the human rights sector and within conflict zones.

The MHPSS component within the online curriculum and the FA would benefit from having two separate focuses: that of the *management of emotions and cultural aspects with family members of the disappeared*, and that of *addressing the cultural shock and emotional toll from the closeness to death and human remains*. The focus would draw from a trauma-informed approach which encompasses some of the outlined needs of participants of the FA as well as capacitating them for direct services within their domain of work. CSVR will be updating the MHPSS training materials during FA V to integrate a more trauma-informed approach to training.



Simulated archaeological activity at the Memorial of San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala

# DISCUSSION

This study has analyzed emerging themes and consolidated key lessons learned from the FA project. It is imperative to highlight some of the limitations of the study. Firstly, access to participants and attendance at focus groups was limited due to low response and attrition. Only one of the three planned focus groups had more than one person attend, while the other two were adjusted to be interviews due to only one person being present. Secondly, internet connectivity issues were an obstacle for one of the mentors and ultimately resulted in the interview concluding early and without usable information.



Participants of FAIV undertaking the simulated archaeological dig at the Memorial of San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala

# CONCLUSION

Overall, the researchers conclude that the FA is trending towards achieving its identified program objectives. Those objectives are:

1. Increase South-based activists', academics' and practitioners' knowledge of forensic tools to locate and identify the disappeared, with a focus on participatory and holistic interventions;
2. Support a community-driven network of South-based activists, academics and practitioners working on issues related to disappeared persons; and
3. Support participants to undertake community-based projects related to disappeared persons.

Each phase demonstrated success in the above objectives. Based on the evidence outlined in this report, each phase consistently shared five themes: hope, justice, connection and humanization, MHPSS, and logistical/structural challenges.

Each phase provided similar reflections on all themes, including the strengths and challenges posed by them, suggesting that despite efforts to address challenges (including fostering connection between participants) and logistical and structural needs, the issues remain.

The FA has faced numerous challenges in undertaking capacity-building in the field of enforced disappearances. However, project partners have responded to the challenges appropriately, allowing for the development and evolution of the project into later phases that provided more opportunities for learning and

growth. Searching for, locating, and identifying disappeared persons, addressing the needs of families of victims of human rights violations and documenting atrocities and human rights violations greatly contribute to rebuilding postconflict societies and promoting respect for human rights. By building the technical capacity of CSO participants around forensic investigations, combined with MHPSS, while providing them with a holistic framework for supporting and meeting the specific needs of victims' families, the FA provides participants with tools and knowledge on how forensic sciences can be used in transitional justice processes.

Further, the FA builds a network of practitioners, activists, and academics with forensic knowledge, which has proven useful for regional conversations around the topic of forensics as well as constant communication among peers. For example, ACT for the Disappeared in Lebanon, which participated in the first cohort of the FA, is currently advising the newly established National Search Commission in Lebanon, with consultations by FA participants and other organizations from Syria and Iraq. A representative from the Gambian Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission, an alumnus from FA II, has collaborated with CSOs in The Gambia and South Sudan, by sharing perspectives on disappearances in Africa. Meanwhile, MHPSS as a component in the training is being strengthened continuously, based on the needs of the participants.

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# ABOUT THE PARTNERS

## **International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC)**

ICSC is the only worldwide network dedicated to transforming places that preserve the past into dynamic spaces that promote civic action on today's struggles for human rights and justice. ICSC is an incubator and disseminator of memory and memorialization programs developed and implemented by its member Sites in regions including the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. By drawing on the expertise and experiences of Secretariat staff and network members globally, ICSC has developed a unique programmatic approach that engages communities on transitional justice issues through the lens of memory and memorialization and the work of ICSC more broadly.

## **Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr)**

CSVr has continued with the transitional justice work that it has undertaken during and after the life of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Over the past fifteen years, it has engaged with international partners to promote effective transitional justice processes in a range of countries, through regional mechanisms as well as in global forums. CSVr has worked on numerous collaborative projects with African and other international partners to conduct research, engage in policy development, build NGO capacity, establish psychosocial support systems, facilitate community and national dialogues, and engage in policy advocacy and legal cases regarding victims' rights.

## **Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (FAFG)**

With decades of experience, FAFG has developed a unique multidisciplinary approach to the search for missing victims, identification of unidentified remains, and holds leading expertise on the investigation into enforced disappearance from the local context of the internal armed conflict in Guatemala. FAFG employs scientific disciplines, such as forensic anthropology, forensic archaeology, forensic genetics, and victim investigation, in an interdisciplinary fashion. The primary goal is to recover, analyze, identify, and return individuals to their families so they may be buried with dignity according to cultural traditions, all the while documenting, analyzing, and safeguarding physical forensic evidence for the use in legal prosecutions for the human rights violations committed. The success in Guatemala is displayed by the support and trust from family members, organizations, and prosecutors working these cases, as well as the recovery of over 8,000 victims' remains and return of over 5,000 remains to their families. FAFG emphasizes a victim-centered approach and adapts to local context that allows the multidisciplinary identification methodology to be replicated in other environments and types of cases.

## **The Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation (GIJTR)**

The Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation (GIJTR) is a consortium of nine global organizations that works alongside communities to amplify the voices of survivors and inspire collective action in countries struggling to confront human rights violations. By addressing past trauma, they seek to change the future. Founded in 2014, GIJTR has worked with partners in 76 countries, fostered over 463 grassroots projects and engaged more than 760 local civil society organizations in building capacities and laying the groundwork for community-wide participation in transitional justice processes.

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