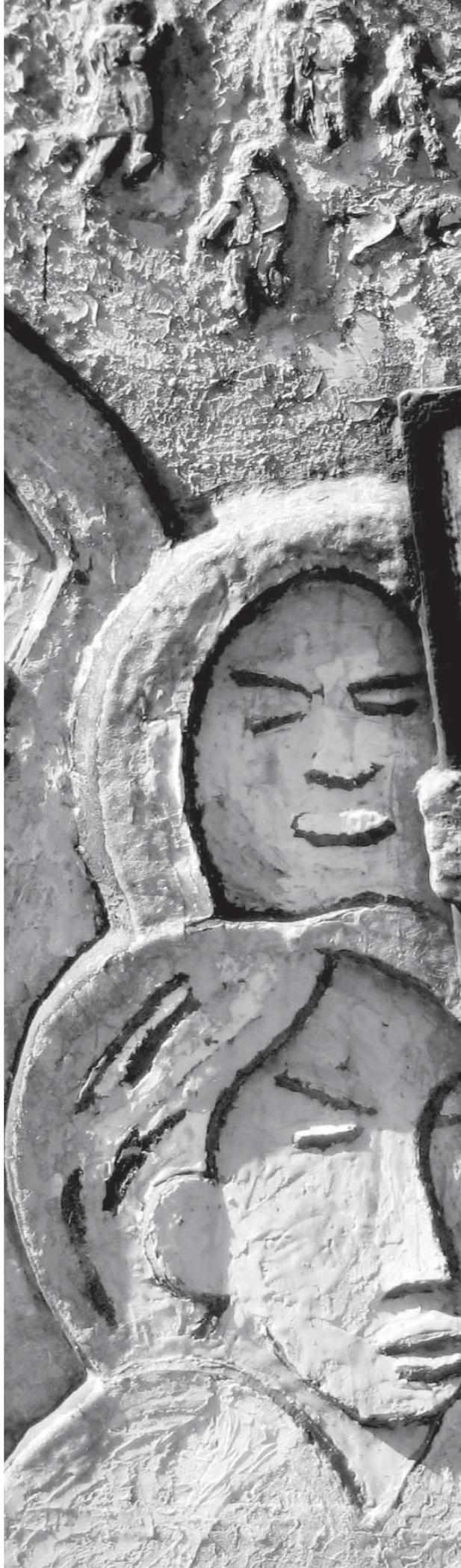
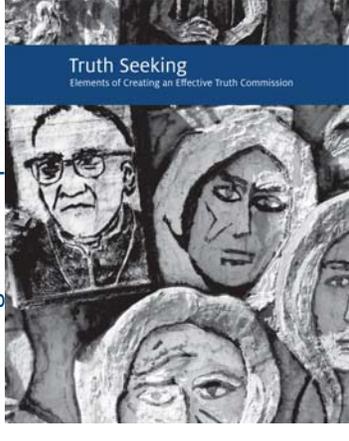


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Chapter 8

Outreach and Communications: Civil Society Partnerships

“Every organization and individual at all levels of society in Timor-Leste should know about *Chega!* [The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste] and do what they can to see that its central message of non-violence, accountability and respect for human rights and the rule of law is realized in our society.”

*Message from President Jose Ramos-Horta, *Chega!* Resource Kit:
Making the CAVR Report Work for Non-Violence and Human Rights, 2008*

To be successful, a truth commission must reach not only victims, witnesses, and others who will participate directly in its processes, but also the broader society in which it operates through outreach.⁴⁶ Public engagement is fundamental to a commission's achieving its goals, especially with regard to:

- Properly informing the public so that they can participate in the truth-seeking process
- Giving victimized populations a voice in the process
- Promoting inclusiveness and transparency as proper governmental practice
- Building a sense of ownership in the truth-seeking process

Outreach and Its Importance

Outreach consists of the materials and activities that a truth commission uses to build direct channels of communication with affected communities. Information should not simply flow one-way, from the commission to society; rather, truth commission outreach should be a vehicle for dialogue and partnership.

Because a commission has a responsibility to engage victims' groups and educate society at large, outreach forms part of the truth commission's main objectives. Outreach also affects the commission as an ongoing process, because communicating with the public is essential to ensuring the commission's sustainability in a political environment that is fluid and full of risks.

Outreach activities should be initiated as early as possible, in order to ensure public understanding of the commission's mission and reduce any misconceptions. The importance of outreach should be reflected in the founding documents and mandate of a truth commission as well as in its work plans (formulated during the preparatory phase).

Objectives of Outreach Programs

- *Dissemination of information:* Truth commissions should strive for transparency, which requires providing the public with access to all information necessary to understand the goals, structure, and working procedures of the institution, as well as timely updates on its progress. The commission should adopt a proactive approach to providing information to priority groups, especially witnesses and victims, so that they can participate in the process and cooperate with the institution. Outreach should make use of printed, online, and audiovisual media. Interaction with the community may be fostered through town hall-style meetings, internet resources, rural fairs, radio programs, and cultural activities, such as theater performances and public art contests. Training sessions, workshops, visits to commission facilities or museums, film screenings, and public hearings may also be effective. Other key elements of information dissemination include educational activities targeting youth and academia and consultative processes, such as public selection processes for commissioners, surveys, and workshops.
- *Establishing dialogue:* Beyond the initial dissemination of information, outreach should promote interaction with the population. Commissions must establish a two-way communication process through which the public can form appropriate expectations about the commission and the commission can understand the needs of the public and adjust its plans accordingly.
- *Consultation:* Consultation gives society and victims' groups, in particular, the opportunity to have a voice in the work of a truth commission, thus promoting a sense of ownership. Consultation mechanisms should focus on facts, such as the assessments of victim groups' circumstances, preferences, and expectations. In the case of

⁴⁶ For more information on outreach strategies, see ICTJ, "Truth Commissions and NGOs: The Essential Relationship" (2004), and Clara Ramírez-Barat, ICTJ, "Making an Impact: Guidelines on Designing and Implementing Outreach Programs for Transitional Justice" (2011).

indigenous peoples, consultation is a legal obligation, as the free, prior, and informed consent of these populations is required for their participation in the process.⁴⁷

- *Participation*: The final element to successful outreach is the promotion of participation in the process. Allowing local governments, civil society, and victims groups to design and implement truth commission programs enriches the commission's work and creates capacity that will be useful in the long term.

Operational Aspects of Outreach

Ideally, the importance of outreach should be reflected in a truth commission's founding documents, and outreach programs should have a dedicated budget. In order to avoid sending contradictory messages, promote efficiency, and guarantee professionalism, outreach functions should be centralized in a specialized unit with its own dedicated staff. Although commissions understandably prefer to hire personnel with communications backgrounds, it is advisable to recruit staff with varied backgrounds in order to meet the range of needs in an outreach unit, including legal and educational expertise.

A strong field presence is fundamental to the good functioning of an outreach program. It helps to maintain a network that can distribute information over a wide geographic area and guarantee a continuous presence in order to build trust with local communities. Regional structures are essential to ensuring that a truth commission has a regular presence in the field, in particularly in rural areas. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Peru, for example, established offices from the outset in the regions most affected by the violence. To guarantee wider coverage, the coordinators of each office traveled within their regions to inform the population about the commission, organizing rural fairs and meetings in the villages with the help of personnel who spoke the local language. These local coordinators were instrumental to organizing the commission's public hearings.

Formulating an Outreach Strategy

Successful outreach programs require a strategic plan that includes the following components:

- *Analysis of the target population and the context*: Good analysis of the context includes basic data on demographics, cultural and social values, the legacy of the conflict, and the political climate. It is also crucial to have a clear picture of existing communications infrastructure, media outlets, and local informational preferences.
- *Clear and specific goals*: The commission should set specific outreach goals according to its general mandate, the mandate's internal priorities, the context and challenges that need be addressed, and the various phases in the life of the commission.
- *Clear messages*: The commission needs to carefully determine the messages and information it plans to communicate to the population at large and to specific groups. Strong discipline around those messages that avoids contradictions and confusion, is fundamental.
- *An activity plan*: On the basis of available resources, goals, and messaging priorities, the commission should set a plan to implement a number of outreach activities, including: establishing and maintaining an online presence, creating printed materials, organizing town hall-style meetings, conducting workshops with different stakeholders, holding public hearings, and organizing volunteers.

Outreach and Media Relations

Commissions must devote special attention to managing press and media relations. Given the complexities of truth commission work and the relative strength and capacity of national media, it cannot be taken for granted

⁴⁷ Supra note 26.

that a truth commission's activities will attract adequate attention from the press or that the media will report on the justice process in an impartial and accurate way. Successful media relations involve providing the press with timely information, specific assistance, and well-organized materials.

Outreach and press officers should seek to actively engage with media organizations to promote basic journalistic standards through training and education. Additionally, outreach officials should design a clear communications strategy to prevent political propaganda from infiltrating press coverage, correct misinterpretations, and provide guidance on ethical reporting. An example of successful media coverage by a truth commission is in South Africa, where newspapers, radio, and television news covered national hearings. Hearings were broadcast live on national radio, and a Sunday evening show summarizing the hearings became the country's most-watched news program.

Issues that should be taken into consideration include:

- *Infrastructure support:* Communications officers must ensure that members of the press have everything they need to do their jobs. Journalists must have access to public proceedings and adequate facilities, including a media room for live broadcasts during hearings, with computers and internet access.
- *Media activities and materials:* A successful media approach should include all of the following: regular press releases, press conferences, meetings and briefings with journalists, facilitation of interviews, and the participation of senior officials in national and international TV and radio programs.
- *Training sessions and best practices:* Reporting on human rights and transitional justice issues requires expertise, accurate historical knowledge, and ethical awareness, especially given the sensitive nature of the subject matter. In order to promote high standards for reporting, outreach programs should organize training activities for national and international journalists and work to ensure that victims and other participants are treated with respect by the media.
- *Building relationships with the press:* Adopting a proactive approach to interacting with journalists is key to successful media relations. The aim of a press program is to create a coherent framework that facilitates consistent and broad media coverage, rather than coverage that only focuses on key moments. It is therefore necessary to provide journalists with a constant flow of useful material. It may also be appropriate to insist on transmitting certain messages about the transparency of the process, especially the role that victims play in the commission's work.

Contribution of Civil Society to Truth Seeking

Nongovernmental organizations have a number of valuable assets to share with commissions with respect to outreach, including access to information, research skills, and the ability to identify key cases and situations for examination. They also have connections with victims and broader civil society and the ability to mobilize public opinion and generate political pressure. Such assets may lead to the involvement of organizations in a variety of activities during the lifespan of a commission, potentially including engaging with the press, producing and disseminating media, working with victims, and gathering and disseminating information.

Civil society's role in outreach can be separated into three stages:

1. *Before the establishment of a truth commission:* Before a truth commission is established, civil society can play a vital role in mobilizing public opinion and public engagement with the truth-seeking process, developing or enhancing the commission's mandate and operational structure, and working to ensure that the commission has credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public and international society. Such engagement includes drafting or enhancing legislation, opening dialogue, and defining and assisting the overall truth commission process. Organizations can even play a critical role in cases where the decision to establish a truth commission

was undemocratic. For example, the Center for Democratic Development in Ghana transformed a political gesture into a national agenda by encouraging open and representative discussions about the truth commission.

Specifically, nongovernmental organizations may engage in the following activities in the lead-up to a truth commission:

- Drafting or contributing to legislation establishing a commission
- Lobbying to improve truth commission legislation (including mandate and commissioner-selection process)
- Convening national actors to discuss international best practices for truth commissions
- Training future commission staff (including executive managers)
- Providing or facilitating counseling services to prepare victims for truth commission hearings
- Educating the public, political actors, and media on transitional justice themes and mechanisms
- Developing consultative mechanisms for the commission
- Establishing patterns of collaboration with the truth commission

In Brazil, the Truth Commission is the direct result of civil society activities at the National Conference on Human Rights that required the creation of a state agency, which resulted in the Third National Plan for Human Rights.⁴⁸

2. *During a truth commission's mandate:* Civil society can continue their advocacy efforts in support of the truth commission and its investigations by providing it with information from various sources or even creating regional and unofficial efforts to establish the truth:

- Human rights documentation centers and their files
- Victims associations, including files collected by individuals
- Groups and individuals in exile and their files
- Prior truth commissions and committees of inquiry
- Court transcripts, proceedings, and records
- Intelligence agency records
- Records of professional bodies (legal, medical, media, and academic)
- Museums and national archives
- International organizations and foreign governments
- Material available under national and international freedom of information provisions

3. *After a truth commission is dissolved:* Civil society organizations can make a critical contribution to a truth commission's lasting impact by helping to ensure a commission's final report is publicly accessible, accurately transcribed or abridged, and available in a variety of formats and languages. To this end, civil society organizations may:

48 Supra note 30.

- Translate the truth commission’s final report into major national languages
- Summarize key findings and recommendations
- Produce illustrated versions of key findings and recommendations
- Monitor the implementation of the commission’s recommendations
- Integrate the commission’s historical findings into school curricula
- Develop short videos or documentaries on the truth-seeking process



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Eduardo González and Howard Varney, eds., *Truth Seeking: Elements of Creating an Effective Truth Commission*. (Brasília: Amnesty Commission of the Ministry of Justice of Brazil; New York: International Center for Transitional Justice) 2013.

75 pages.

This publication is also available in Arabic, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

