international center for TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

FOCUS: TRUTH-SEEKING

Unofficial or Local Truth-seeking Initiatives

In the absence of governmental action or as preparation for it, some local communities or civil society groups sometime seek to recognize and investigate the legacy of past human rights abuses. Such actions can help lead to more formal transitional justice approaches, including truth commissions, vetting and prosecutions.

BACKGROUND

Unofficial or local truth-seeking is an approach that became pervasive in Latin America beginning in the 1980s and '90s, with the demise of military governments there. Religious communities, academic institutions and local governments cooperated to document human rights violations and issue comprehensive reports that sometimes prompted democratic governments into action. Unofficial truth projects represent an important shift away from a "one size fits all"' approach to accountability and justice, and respect social context and enrich policy. They give human rights organizations, religious communities, victims groups, universities and municipal governments opportunities for creative roles.

FORMS OF TRUTH-SEEKING AND THEIR RESULTS

Some unofficial truth projects are commission-like efforts. These initiatives tend to complement or precede state-led projects and produce reports similar in shape and scope to those of truth commissions. Documentation centers may build the basis for future truth-telling activities. In communities where the public demands criminal trials, unofficial truth projects can take the form of mock-trials that document abuses. Local communities also engage in truth-telling through art, through video, theatre and literature projects that focus on the past. These initiatives may lead to the creation of memorials, museums and traveling exhibits.

Truth projects "from below" tend to focus on a small part of the larger story of a society's past but provide an avenue to recognize victimized communities and constituencies. By challenging the official record, these projects can complement or catalyze the launch of official action, and ensure wider participation.

- **Northern Ireland: Ardoyne Community Project.** From the late 1960s to the late 1990s, a period known as "The Troubles," confrontations between Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland, as well as armed clashes between the security forces, loyalist paramilitary groups and the Irish Republican Army caused large numbers of civilian deaths and injuries. The findings of official inquiries did not always satisfy local communities.

  A local effort called the Ardoyne Community Project attempted to retell the history of the conflict through the stories of a Catholic community that lost 99 residents to politically-motivated killings. Published in 2002, Ardoyne: the Untold Story included 350 testimonies and 50 oral histories by the family and close friends of those who died. The community report commemorated victims through intimate and compassionate portraits of their character.

- **United States: Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project.** The Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project sought to acknowledge and clarify the truth about the killing of five civil rights activists by Ku Klux Klan members and neo-Nazis on November 3, 1979, in Greensboro, North Carolina. After extensive local consultation with religious communities, academic institutions, business and local government, the project appointed an independent Truth and Reconciliation Commission mandated to conduct an impartial investigation, make findings and recommendations.

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The commission conducted archival investigation, obtained testimony from witnesses, victims and perpetrators and conducted well-attended public hearings. Its comprehensive report, published in 2006, has become the platform for community education and policy proposals.

- **Guatemala: The Recovery of Historical Memory Project.** From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala endured an internal armed conflict between state forces and guerrilla groups. Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans were displaced or killed. The vast majority of the victims were indigenous people targeted by counter-insurgent action.

  As the government and the guerrillas reached a comprehensive peace agreement under the auspices of the UN, they decided to establish a truth commission (Comision para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH). However, many civil society members believed that the commission did not have adequate authority. With support of the Catholic Church, civil society launched an independent truth-telling project, Recuperacion de la Memoria Historica (REMHI). It conducted its inquiry over three years in all regions of Guatemala, obtaining the testimony of 6 500 survivors.

  In 1998 REMHI released its report, Guatemala: Nunca Mas!, finding the army responsible for over 80 percent of 55,021 documented human rights crimes. The REMHI report contributed to CEH by setting standards of professionalism, suggesting avenues of investigation and ensuring victims' participation.

- **Brasil: Nunca Mais.** Between 1964 and 1979, the military government that ruled Brazil systematically carried out torture, disappearances and illegal executions. Brazilian military rulers were also active participants in Operación Cóndor, an alliance of South American military regimes to hunt down and execute opponents. Brazil, however, remains the only Latin American country that has not marked the end of military rule with a truth commission.

  In the absence of official action, an ecumenical initiative of Catholic and Protestant leaders covertly examined archives of security forces and produced Brasil: Nunca Mais, a comprehensive report clarifying the fate of hundreds of opponents executed or disappeared. The project has catalyzed action by several local governments and cities to honor the memory of the victims, including city-based inquiries, exhumations, and reparations programs. In 2007, a federal initiative charged with issuing reparations to survivors, formally recognized in a report the crimes committed by the military government.

- **Colombia: Palace of Justice Truth Commission (ongoing).** During their country's long internal armed conflict, Colombians have suffered massive human rights violations, including the 1985 siege of the Palace of Justice, seat of the Colombian Supreme Court. On November 6, 1985, a guerrilla group took control of the court building, and government forces then launched an assault, broadcast on TV. About 100 persons were killed, including all the hostage-takers and all members of the Supreme Court, and 12 persons were reported missing.

  Judicial investigations were inconclusive. In 2005, the Colombian Supreme Court appointed a commission of three former chief justices to investigate those events. The commission has produced educational materials and released previously unavailable information. Its work prompted new investigations by prosecutors back to action, and officials allegedly responsible for some of the violence are facing trials.

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