

# IN THEIR OWN VOICES

**A Manual for Inclusive, Victim-Centered  
Documentation and Memorialization  
of Forced Displacement**



**GIJTR**

Global Initiative for Justice  
Truth & Reconciliation

# ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION OF SITES OF CONSCIENCE

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) is a global network of museums, historic sites, archives and memory initiatives dedicated to building a more just and peaceful future by engaging communities in remembering struggles for human rights and addressing their modern repercussions. Founded in 1999, ICSC now includes more than 370 Sites of Conscience members in 80 countries. ICSC supports these members through grants, networking and training.



International Coalition of  
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# ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE FOR JUSTICE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION (GIJTR)

Around the world, there is an urgent need for justice, truth, and reconciliation in countries where legacies of gross human rights violations cast a shadow on transitions from repressive regimes to participatory and democratic forms of governance. Yet, existing transitional justice models often overlook the vital voices of local and marginalized communities, which are crucial to securing a peaceful and sustainable future. The Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation (GIJTR), spearheaded by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC), aims to bridge this gap collaborating with local populations, civil society and governments, offering victim-centered, collaborative approaches to transitional justice.

# ABOUT THE AFGHANISTAN HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY ORGANIZATION (AHRDO)

The Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO) is an independent, non-governmental, and non-profit organization that is committed to promoting human rights, democracy, and justice in Afghanistan through investigating and documenting atrocity crimes, advocating for a victim-centered justice such as through international justice mechanisms, designing cultural and artistic initiatives to foster inter-community peace and dialogue, and developing public memory and recollection of millions of war victims as an antidote to the deep-seated culture of impunity and the profoundly ingrained ethos of war and violence in the country.

# ABOUT THIS MANUAL

Launched in March 2024, *In Their Own Voices: A Manual for Inclusive, Victim-Centered Documentation and Memorialization of Forced Displacement* provides guidance to adopt inclusive and victim-centered documentation and memorialization approaches that empower forcibly displaced people to shape their own narratives and ensure their meaningful and equitable participation in decision-making processes.

This manual is based on the virtual capacity-building workshop *In Their Own Voice: Inclusive and Victim-Centered Documentation and Memorialization of Forced Displacement* organized by ICSC and AHRDO on September 12–14, 2023. Facilitated by ICSC’s staff and a pool of experts from The Gambia, Myanmar, South Africa, and Syria, the workshop built on both ICSC’s [Global Initiative for Truth and Reconciliation](#)’s documentation and memorialization work and on its one-of-a-kind [Correcting the Record Methodology](#). **The manual also builds on the experiences and learnings of the eight organizations that were awarded subgrants to implement inclusive and victim-centered documentation and memorialization projects with forcibly displaced people** as part of [Afghanistan: Advancing Rights Adopting an Inclusive and Victim-Centered Documentation and Memorialization Approach](#), a 10-month partnership between ICSC and AHRDO to advance the rights of victims of human rights violations and forced displacement in both Afghanistan and globally.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ICSC thanks the eight organizations that shared learnings from their inclusive and victim-centered documentation and memorialization projects with forcibly displaced people, including the following:

- [Afghanistan Forensic Science Organization \(AFSO\)](#)—Canada
- [Afghan LGBT Organization \(ALO\)](#)—Czech Republic
- [Afghan Refugees Solidarity Association \(ARSA\)](#)—Turkey
- [InfoPark](#)—Serbia
- [Global Society Initiative for Peace and Democracy \(GLOSIPAD\)](#)—Uganda
- [Mujer Diaspora](#)—Spain and England
- [National Museum of Taiwan History \(NMTH\)](#)—Taiwan
- [Rohingya Human Rights Network \(RHRN\)](#)—Canada and Bangladesh

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## FOREWORD

Societies enduring prolonged armed conflicts and widespread violence often grapple with the breakdown of social order and structures, falling into an endless cycle of violence and conflict. Breaking this cycle and escaping this vortex is a universal question that is not easily answered. The solution demands a redefinition and reconstruction of the shattered societal structures, which is a complex and challenging task. Reproducing the old order is often ineffective, and achieving lasting peace requires the establishment of a new social order in which all segments of society, particularly victims, perceive themselves as partners and beneficiaries of fair and equal citizenship status.

The issue of social participation and equality holds immense significance for victims. They, who gauge any political or social program linked to collective fate against this criterion. Programs and processes failing to provide a clear and satisfying answer to victim participation essentially predestine their failure.

The suffering and torment of victims afflict society like an ever-fresh wound. Achieving lasting peace seems unattainable until this wound is healed. It's clear that many of the damages and suffering caused by war and violence are irreparable; lost lives and missed opportunities and resources are unrecoverable. The fundamental questions that need to be addressed on a large scale in society are how the suffering of survivors and victims and the outrage caused by violence and crimes can be healed, and how society can transition from a cycle of violence and turmoil to peace and mutual acceptance.

Fostering social solidarity with victims and recognizing them publicly, on one hand, and condemning crimes and violence by the public conscience on the other are necessary to put an end to violent situations, prevent the repetition of violent events, and move society beyond past tragedies and toward peaceful coexistence. On the two ends of this transition spectrum are accountability for a blood-soaked past and the creation of a new, peaceful future. Anchoring the victims at the center can create social solidarity and consensus that facilitate this difficult transition. This is what is understood as a “victim-centered approach.”

How is a victim-centered approach employed? The above-mentioned dichotomy explains two main aspects of the victim-centered approach: The victim-centered approach in confronting violence and crimes, and the victim-centered approach in creating peace and new social structures. To address these aspects, four fundamental objectives must be met:

- Victims must be allowed the opportunity to speak about violent events earnestly, and to be heard and attended to seriously;
- The suffering of victims must be acknowledged by society, and a condemnation of violence and crimes must be expressed;
- The demands and desires of victims must be placed at the forefront when addressing crimes and empowering victims to have a decisive role in this process; and
- Victims must be actively involved in peace-building programs and the establishment of new, more equitable and just systems.

Achieving these objectives involves designing and adapting a comprehensive program with diverse, multidimensional and simultaneous operational actions. Documentation and healing initiatives for victims serve as a fundamental starting point for this program, as many subsequent actions rely on this documentation. For example, addressing crimes and determining their perpetrators depends on having reasonably documented evidence.

This manual aims to explain documentation and memorialization initiatives, emphasizing a victim-centered approach and introducing key actions along with their methods.

## A Victim-Centered Approach in Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization’s (AHRDO) Activities:

Victims have been at the center of many activities of the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization, and programs related to justice and peacebuilding have been implemented with a victim-centered approach. Documentation and truth-seeking; victim healing; commemoration and fighting against oblivion; organizing and empowering victims; advocating for their demands and requests; and peacebuilding efforts have all been undertaken. Some of these activities have specifically focused on vulnerable groups including the wounded, women, children, minorities and the displaced.

### AHRDO’s activities are categorized into the following:

**Collecting Victims’ Narratives:** Through this activity, AHRDO has conducted thousands of conversations with victims and their families, gathering and organizing firsthand accounts of violent events, in their own words. Some major acts of violence have also been documented, and interviews have been conducted with dozens of victims of these events. These narratives are gradually being published. To date, 128 narratives spanning four volumes have been published, and several others are ready for publication. Documentation,



Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), Afghanistan



Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), Afghanistan

commemoration and fighting desensitization to violence are the primary objectives of collecting these narratives. At a broader level, these narratives serve as a primary and key source for writing Afghanistan’s history of conflicts.

**Victims’ Hearings:** Although held in limited sessions, AHRDO facilitated for the first time in Afghanistan firsthand accounts of violent events narrated by victims. From 2019 to 2021, AHRDO conducted 25 public hearing sessions.

**Memory Box Exhibitions:** The Memory Box exhibitions were first held in 2012 under the title “Memory Box: An Effort to Prevent Disaster” in collaboration with families of victims in several provinces of Afghanistan. Images, objects and personal documents of victims were collected in dedicated memory boxes, accompanied by a brief account of their lives and deaths, and then displayed publicly. Each exhibition was held by displaying new victims’ boxes, and these boxes and related items were then transferred to AHRDO’s dedicated archive. Over the following years, more than a thousand victims’ boxes were prepared, culminating in the establishment of the Victims Museum in 2019.

**Educational and Counseling Sessions:** These sessions were conducted to inform, unite and empower victims to pursue their demands and advocate for their rights. Educational manuals were prepared on various topics related to victims’ rights and demands, including mechanisms and channels for addressing international crimes; principles and foundations of international humanitarian law; transitional justice mechanisms; and victims’ participation in peace-building processes. Subsequently, dozens of educational programs and counseling workshops were organized for victims’ families in various Afghan provinces. The role of social groups, particularly victims, in societies transitioning from violence to fair and lasting peace, has been a focal point in these programs. Special counseling sessions to address trauma and post-conflict psychological damages to family members of victims were also part of these sessions. AHRDO also organized numerous conferences and seminars in this regard.

**Organizing Victims for Advocacy:** The initial phase of this program began in 2012 with the creation of “Local Victim Jirgas” and “Local Victim Councils” in Kabul and several other cities in Afghanistan. This initiative continued by forming victim networks at provincial and zone levels in subsequent years. Through these networks, victims were mobilized to champion their rights and assert their demands at provincial and zone levels while encouraging other victims to join.

These local networks subsequently collaborated to extend advocacy efforts to a national scale.

AHRDO culminated these efforts by convening the Victims National Convention on December 10, 2020, coinciding with International Human Rights Day and Afghanistan's National Victims' Day, and marking the formation of the first National Victims' Network. This network then conducted various educational sessions and coordination meetings at the grassroots level. Additionally, it orchestrated gatherings and protest marches advocating for victims' rights across multiple provinces, supported by AHRDO.

**Thematic Research:** Conducting thematic research on acts of violence and international crimes in Afghanistan is another segment of AHRDO's activities. These research endeavors specifically prioritize the victims of these events, collecting primary data through numerous interviews and discussions with the victims.

**Artistic Approach:** The integration of artistic tools and methods has remained an integral part of AHRDO's initiatives. Participatory theater, particularly focusing on the Theater of the Oppressed, is one of the methods AHRDO has employed in its programs involving victims. These theater productions are based on the documented narratives of victims, performed with the participation of victims, and managed and directed by AHRDO's art team. AHRDO has organized festivals for storytelling, poetry and painting, produced documentaries, and crafted visual and audio clips centering on themes linked to or in collaboration with victims, constituting another dimension of AHRDO's artistic programs.

AHRDO undertakes these activities with a forward-looking approach, aiming to achieve justice and sustainable peace. AHRDO firmly believes that the success of peacebuilding programs in a war-torn society is significantly limited without the participation of victims. Especially in countries such as Afghanistan that have endured long years of conflict and violence and where victims constitute a significant portion of the population, a "victim-centered peace" facilitates the mending of societal ruptures that perpetuate conflicts and violence.

*Hussain Saramad, Researcher, Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization's (AHRDO)*

# INTRODUCTION

**Forced displacement is on the rise in all parts of the world. According to [statistics released by the United Nations Refugee Agency \(UNHCR\)](#), more than 100 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2022 as a result of war, violence, human rights violations, or political, ethnic, gender or religious persecution.**

These are 100 million invisible and often dehumanized and misrepresented stories that are permeating media, political agendas and other forms of public discourse in many in-transit and host countries, resulting in social tensions and violence against forcibly displaced people.

Documenting and memorializing experiences of forced displacement while adopting an approach that centers and amplifies the voices of forcibly displaced people and fosters their self-agency is paramount in order to shift social perceptions and policies on forced displacement—and to ensure their multidimensional needs are met, including their right to truth, justice and accountability.

From May 2023 to March 2024, the [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience \(ICSC\)](#), through its [Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation \(GIJTR\)](#), and the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), partnered to support [20 organizations working with forcibly displaced people in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Canada, Czech Republic, England, Germany, Guatemala, Serbia, Spain, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey and Uganda](#) in its efforts to advance the rights of victims of human rights violations and forced displacement by adopting an inclusive and victim-centered approach to documentation and memorialization.

# VICTIM-CENTERED APPROACH TO DOCUMENTATION AND MEMORIALIZATION

## Defining a Victim-Centered Approach to Documentation and Memorialization

**Victim-centered Approach to Documentation:** Documentation is the act of investigating, researching and documenting what happened in order to build a historical narrative. It can be used to document and keep a register of the truth, seek accountability and justice, raise awareness, and contribute to memorialization.

Victim-centered documentation is an approach to collecting testimonies and preserving information related to human rights violations that places the rights, wishes, needs, safety, dignity and well-being of the victims or survivors at the center throughout the documentation process. This approach recognizes the sensitive nature of the information being collected and the potential impacts on the individuals involved. It emphasizes collaboration, ensuring that victims have ownership of their stories and respecting their autonomy.

**Victim-centered Approach to Memorialization:** Memorialization refers to processes through which memory is preserved and perpetuated. It is a means of honoring victims and survivors, recognizing their experience, and remembering—and as such, it is an important step in victims' and survivors' healing process. Memorialization plays a crucial role in countering

harmful narratives and raising awareness of marginalized groups, while also serving as a powerful advocacy tool to foster victims' and survivors' rights. Memorialization can take many different forms, ranging from commemorative ceremonies and artistic expressions to memorials, museums and traveling exhibitions.

Victim-centered memorialization is an approach to preserving the memory of a particular conflict or historical event that centers the experiences, perspectives and dignity of the victims and survivors. This approach recognizes the unique stories, expertise and perspectives of those affected, aiming to give them a voice and ensure that their memories are preserved in an inclusive and holistic way. It often involves engaging with survivors, families and affected communities in order to shape the memorialization process, allowing their input to influence or even dictate the narrative and representation of the event.

### Why Is Adopting a Victim-centered Approach Important?

Adopting a victim-centered approach to documentation and memorialization is important to:

- avoid exposing survivors and victims to unnecessary risks, including the risk of re-traumatization and re-victimization, or increasing, in some way, their vulnerability;
- restore a sense of safety, power and belonging;
- ensure victims' and survivors' voices, multidimensional needs and concerns are heard and directly inform actions and policy-making;
- foster empathy and generate new understandings within host communities and societies of complex topics; and
- counter the misinformation and damaging public discourse that leads to discrimination, hatred and violence.

## Examples of a Victim-Centered Approach to Documentation and Memorialization

### The African Network against Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances—ANEKED (The Gambia)

**The African Network against Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances** (ANEKED) is a civil society organization led by African women human rights activists. The organization documents forced disappearances and summary executions and advocates for justice for victims and their families. In 2021, ANEKED launched “The Duty to Remember” project to commemorate the victims of Yahya Jammeh’s dictatorship and make them visible to Gambian society. Through the project, ANEKED collected testimonies, portraits and artifacts of victims given by their families. In a context where, in 99% of the cases, families never retrieved the remains of their loved ones, those personal objects were a powerful means to highlight the humanity of those individuals who were forcibly disappeared and killed. Throughout the project, ANEKED’s main concern was to ensure the process would avoid re-traumatization of the victims. To that end, ANEKED invested time to build trust with the victims, to discuss the project’s vision and understand the needs and expectations of the victims, and to ensure that victims would feel comfortable saying no.



African Network Against Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances (ANEKED), The Gambia

### The Herstories Archive (Sri Lanka)

**The Herstories Archive** is an auto-ethnographic project that has collected 285 personal narratives of mothers from the north, south, and east of Sri Lanka during the years 2012–2013. The stories highlight, in the women’s own words, their family histories, their experiences of war and peace, and their hopes for the future. The project is based on the idea that in war and peace, women’s stories of resilience, courage, and hope

are marginalized or left out of history. Herstories attempts to address this gap by collecting mothers’ narratives on the ground. To access rural women, the team contacted community-based organizations working on women’s development and organized a series of community meetings with women. Subsequently, each woman was visited at her home where her life story was recorded through videos, photos and other visual mediums in the form of trees of life, memory-capture timelines and hand-written letters. During the process, whenever possible, the team connected the women and their families to other organizations doing socioeconomic development and psychosocial work, and to private donors for support. The original materials have been deposited as a permanent collection at the National Archives of Sri Lanka as a testament to women’s strength. A curated exhibition of 70 narratives traveled to both different regions of Sri Lanka and foreign countries—and at each location the team encouraged engagement with the material through dialogue and discussion.

## Act for the Disappeared—ACT (Lebanon)

**Act for the Disappeared**'s mission is to both document the fate of people who have gone missing in Lebanon during armed conflicts since 1975 and amplify the voices of their families who have been silenced by a state-sponsored policy of amnesia. Through its work, ACT has realized how much telling one's story over and over again to journalists and human rights organizations can re-traumatize families of missing people. To address this risk, in 2016, ACT decided to start a memorialization project that would foster self-agency and a sense of power for relatives of missing people. ACT organized several meetings with relatives of missing people to present memorialization initiatives and discuss their expectations and needs. These discussions lead to the launching of "Empty Chairs Waiting Families," a project in partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross, wherein hundreds of relatives of missing people collectively designed and painted a chair that reflects a missing loved one's personality and the memories their relatives might have of them. This work brought together families from different backgrounds, highlighting their common struggle to know the fate of their missing loved ones.

# ADOPTING A VICTIM-CENTERED APPROACH TO DOCUMENTATION AND MEMORIALIZATION WITH FORCIBLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

**Forcibly displaced people remain among the most vulnerable members of society. Most of them have suffered violence in their country of origin and struggle with poverty, lack of psychosocial support, violence and marginalization in both their transit and host communities.**

Documenting and memorializing the experiences of forcibly displaced people requires considering certain ethical principles to allow the establishing of bonds of trust, respect and ethical commitment with the people who are part of the documentation and memorialization processes; adopting a sensitive and non-re-traumatizing approach; and effectively adapting to their needs in order to foster self-agency.

## Follow Ethical Principles

These ethical principles help build trust, respect and safety with the people involved in the documentation and memorialization processes—both interviewees and interviewers. It is imperative that everyone in the team always puts these principles first.

## 1. Be Clear and Transparent about Objectives

Documentation and memorialization can serve many purposes (accountability, truth-seeking, healing, advocacy, awareness and reconciliation). While some of the functions may overlap, it is important to set clear goals from the outset in order to avoid overpromising (e.g., the overpromise of justice) and manage victims' and survivors' expectations. Dedicating time to explaining what can be done, what cannot be done, what is uncertain, and how their stories will be used is crucial.

Having clear objectives also allows one to adopt the appropriate methodology, determine how stories are gathered, archived and accessed, and make decisions during the process that maximize its effectiveness for those specific purposes.

### The Different Uses of Testimonies' Collection

According to their mission, some civil society organizations focus their documentation and archive efforts on only one of these uses, while others focus on mixed uses.

**For accountability:** Many forcibly disappeared persons are victims of human rights violations and their testimonies can serve to pursue justice and accountability. Initiatives that aim at providing information for litigation will give priority to cases and evidentiary elements, in addition to taking care of the chain of custody, trying to establish facts, places, dates, participants, patterns of criminality, etc. Courts generally require specific standards and methods of factual evidence collection and most of civil society documentation does not meet these criteria, but they can provide important and reliable information on which to build victim registries and criminal cases.

**For truth-seeking:** The collection of testimonies can help in seeking to clarify the truth about events that represent crimes against human rights by determining who was responsible for the acts committed, the circumstances in which they were committed, the victims who were affected, and the possible causes of these events. It contributes to the creation of a historical record of past human rights violations and plays

a powerful role in acknowledging victims' and survivors' experience of human rights atrocities. The focus is on gathering the victims'/survivors' biographical data, relationships with the community, and perspective within the historical context of the events.

**For healing:** Providing a space for individuals to share their story can contribute to long-term healing. Being heard and recognized by their own communities and society in general empowers individuals to rebuild their lives and restore and reinstate them back into society. This requires adopting both a sensitive and non-retraumatizing approach and empowering storytelling methods.

**For awareness and advocacy:** Collecting testimonies is crucial to foster better understanding of experiences and the multidimensional needs of individuals and ensure that support and public policies are adapted and efficient. Personal stories also contribute to fostering empathy, public understanding of past abuses, and, in the case of forcibly displaced people, better acceptance by host communities. Through education programs, those initiatives can also promote cultures that respect human rights and prevent future cycles of violence.

**For reconciliation:** Storytelling initiatives that bring opposing groups together can contribute to the rebuilding of relationships between previously divided communities. It can create shared understanding and a broad acceptance of the historical account of the past and contribute to rebuilding relations between different groups of victims/survivors and also victim/survivor and their community.

## 2. Do No Harm

The most important principle in carrying out documentation and memorialization efforts is to ensure that participants are not harmed during the process by being exposed to unnecessary risks, re-victimizing them, or increasing, in some way, their vulnerability.

## Assess the Risks

To ensure the security of participants, it is crucial to identify the risks you may encounter and constantly assess them. Think about potential internal and external risks:

- Vulnerabilities and insecurities of communities/actors (What are the dangers and threats? What traumas do victims and survivors have to overcome to share their experience?)
- Favorable/unfavorable socio-political conditions

Risk management and mitigation strategies can include the following:

- Guaranteeing the anonymity of participants, which must be clearly defined in consent forms and procedures, and establishing “anonymization” processes
- Conducting the documentation and memorialization process, or parts of it, outside the country where the participant is at risk
- Developing self-care strategies

## 3. Informed Consent

Individuals participating in the process need to be provided with clear information about the objectives you wish to achieve as well as any future uses of the outcomes of your project. Each interviewee's agreement must be recorded on an informed consent form, which must be provided to them at the onset of the process and completed at the end of the interview. If the interviewee cannot provide written informed consent, the consent can be recorded in video.

## 4. Compliance with Agreements and Commitments

Participating individuals should feel absolute freedom regarding when to stop sharing their experiences and even changing their story content. They should

hold the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Since making the first contact, the project's team should comply with all the agreements reached during the process.

## Adopt a Sensitive and Non-re-traumatizing Approach

The experiences of forced migration, from its root causes to displacement itself, leave a mark on those who live through it. Therefore, sensitive and non-retraumatizing approaches must be taken to ensure the safety and well-being of victims and survivors when conducting documentation and memorialization projects.

## Trauma, Retraumatization and Forcibly Displaced People

In this manual, trauma is understood as the impact of an event on a particular person or group of people. Drawing from this definition, psychological or emotional trauma refers to the damage or injury to the psyche after living



through an extremely frightening or distressing event that may result in challenges in functioning or coping normally after the incident.

It is important to consider trauma when gathering information to avoid retraumatization at any point in the information-gathering process. Some of the traumatic events forced migrants might experience include the following:<sup>1</sup>

- **Pre-migration:** War trauma, torture, tribal conflict, conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, loss of family and community members, land and livelihoods (among others).
- **During Migration:** Sexual violence, infant mortality, severe injury, loss of family and community members, basic needs not being met (among others).
- **After Migration:** Structural violence, discrimination and harassment, social isolation, identity confusion, lack of environmental mastery (among others).

As a direct consequence, traumatized individuals can feel extremely vulnerable, frightened and hopeless. Trauma shatters people's assumptions, such as the view of one's self as positive, the belief that the world is a meaningful and orderly place, the belief that there is an end to suffering, the trust that other human beings are benign, and/or the belief that the world is a safe place.

Retraumatization is a conscious or unconscious reminder of past trauma that results in a re-experiencing of the initial trauma event. It can be triggered by a situation, attitude or expression, or by certain environments that replicate the dynamics (loss of power/control/safety) of the original trauma.

Therefore, safe spaces must be provided for victims and survivors to engage in documentation and memorialization projects—and only people who feel safe about the process must engage in it. Facilitators need to be aware of possible symptoms and triggers to minimize distress and avoid retraumatization.

## ■ Trauma-informed Approach (TIA)

The Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA) recognizes that traumatic experiences terrify, overwhelm and violate the individual. TIA is a commitment to not repeat these experiences and, in whatever way possible, restore a sense of safety, power and belonging. It should be adopted at all levels of the documentation and memorialization work and apply to all people involved in the process, in the

understanding that the topics addressed may contain sensitive and painful elements.

The following are actions to consider:

- Clearly inform the participants about what to expect;
- Manage victims' expectations—what can be done, what cannot be done, what is uncertain, how their stories will be used, etc.;
- Communicate to participants, "It is okay if you are not ready—we can document when you are...";
- Consider participants' feelings and emotions as part of their story, and be sensitive.
- Ask whether participants are comfortable continuing with the process, particularly when they are sharing difficult experiences, such as sexual and gender-based violence, torture, etc.;
- Consider using other methods of sharing their story (storytelling)—sometimes victims find it easier to speak about their experiences using more abstract or artistic methods that enable them to describe the events outside their firsthand narrative;
- Stop the testimony collection when the victim is no longer able to continue or finds it difficult to relive the incident. (Note: Tearing up or crying are not the only symptoms that should be acknowledged; there can be other symptoms too such as visual discomfort or inability to speak);
- Map available mental health and psychosocial services and refer victims to a psychosocial professional for sustained support and services to deal with their trauma and heal;
- Take time to reflect on the experience with the participants. The project's team could ask them how they feel after the interaction to reflect on how the experience has impacted them, what comes easy, and what the limits and blind spots are; and
- Share the final project's products with the participants for their validation and sign-off.

## How to Manage Participants' Distress:<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about violent or other horrific events can cause people to become distressed. This is normal. However, if you notice that a participant's level of distress is making it hard for them to continue the interaction, do the following:

- Stop the interaction/action and be silent until the participant calms down. You could then say, "You seem very upset. Are you OK to continue, or would you prefer to stop?"
- Offering a glass of water, opening a window, taking a break can also be helpful.
- Do not continue if the interviewee's level of distress is not decreasing and find a family member or friend who can assist. For a virtual session, it may be helpful to have an alternative contact.
- At the end of the interaction, remind the participant about the MHPSS/counseling support services, if available.

## Grounding Technique

When a person finds themselves overwhelmed with emotions or unable to stop thinking about or imagining something that happened, the "grounding" technique can be used to feel less

overwhelmed. Grounding works by bringing the person's attention away from their inner thoughts and back to the present (and the external world).

**The "Grounding Through our 5 Senses" Technique** is a good option to bring back the participants by making them focus on their breathing and then identify the following out loud:

- 5 things they can **see**
- 4 things they can **touch**
- 3 things they can **hear**

- 2 things they can **smell**
- 1 thing they can **taste**

## Project Team Safety

When engaging with victims and survivors, it is crucial for the team to establish safe spaces to process the participant's experience and the team's own experiences of listening, along with identifying potential triggers. It's important to be mindful of our own symptoms to initiate our own regulation, if needed.

**Afghan LGBT Organization (ALO)** is a non-governmental organization headquartered in the Czech Republic that aims to empower Afghan LGBTIQ+ individuals, provide access to support and resources, and amplify their voices. Through its work, ALO aims to create safe passages and opportunities for LGBTQI individuals amidst challenging circumstances. As a part of its subgrant project, the ALO team documented the lived experiences of 16 LGBTIQ+ people, with a main focus on the impact of sexual violence and produced podcasts. ALO was able to minimize the risk of retraumatization of the community by organizing several individual meetings to explain the project, gain their trust and co-develop the questions they used for the podcasts. As a part of their trauma-informed approach, ALO provided mental health and psychosocial referral to participants and financial assistance when needed. Based on the needs of, and challenges faced by, its community and the absence of proper support for the Afghan LGBTIQ+ survivors in Europe, ALO's team decided to initiate a long-term program to provide mental health for LGBTIQ+ people.

## Adapt to Needs and Build Trust and Self-Agency

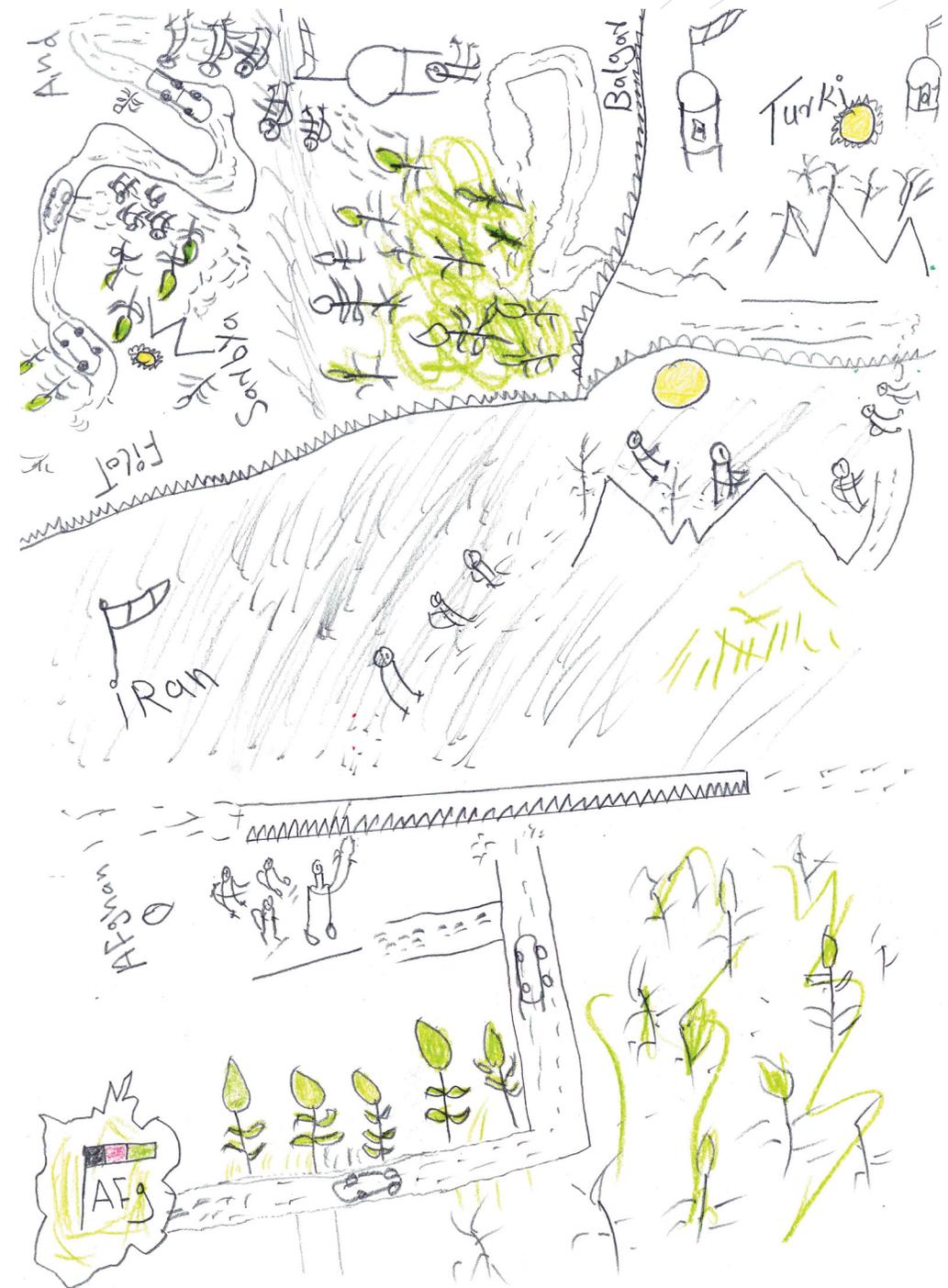
Forcibly displaced people encompass individuals with a wide diversity of experiences, cultural and social codes, situations and challenges. Engaging in documentation and memorialization with forcibly displaced people requires gaining in-depth knowledge of the specific needs of the group the project's team wants to work with. This helps not only answer their needs and foster their rights but also be better positioned to build trust and engagement with them.

### Adapt to Participants' Needs

Understanding and adapting to the specific needs of the participating group entails the following:

- Provide a safe space for them to voice their needs;
- Identify and refer to available assistance, resources and support services;
- Understand the gender dynamics and cultural and socioeconomic dynamics within the group;
- Be flexible to adapt the project to those needs; and
- Constantly assess whether the project process and outputs are in line with the participants' needs.

**InfoPark** is an association established in 2015 in Serbia in an effort to respond to the immediate refugee situation and unprecedented inflow and outflow of refugees from the Middle East, Asia and Africa. It started as an information and connectivity point in a park, near Belgrade's bus station where refugees and migrants were coming to seek the help and support they needed. As the needs were growing, InfoPark started introducing new services, including protection and psychosocial support for refugee and migrant children, including unaccompanied and separated children. As a part of its subgrant project, the InfoPark team engaged unaccompanied children to tell their experience of displacement and share how they imagine their own future through drawings. Subjected to their parents' decisions and then forced to flee, these children were not used to having agency and did not feel comfortable taking part in the project. The InfoPark team took time not to



InfoPark, Serbia

force them and rather devise an activity that would respect their needs; this process required the InfoPark team to adjust the project four times and eventually ask participants, “What do you think I should know about you?”

## Building Confidence

Trauma caused by conflict-related violence, abuses in all forms, discrimination and multiple losses make forcibly displaced people extremely vulnerable, hindering their trust.

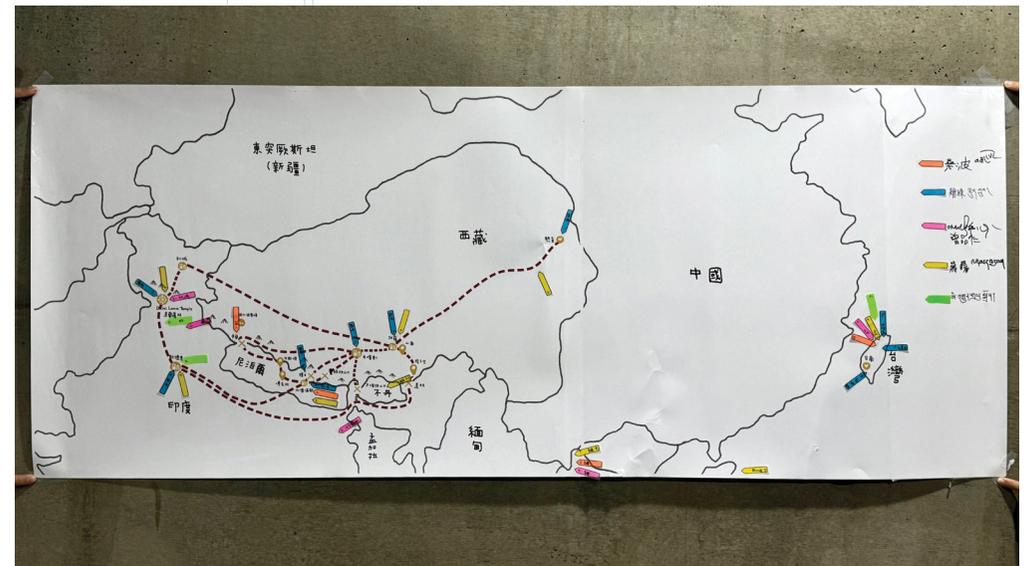
Gaining trust and building bridges requires:

- building an equal relationship;
- valuing and recognizing the groups’ knowledge, experience, and capacity;
- identifying key community partners and stakeholders within the community who have an interest in the success of the project;
- not rushing the process and allowing for it to run its course in its own time; and
- pulling back when necessary.

**Global Society Initiative for Peace and Democracy (GLOSIPAD)** is a South Sudanese civil society organization that supports peace-building and conflict-mitigation initiatives, advocates for human rights, facilitates the sharing and collecting of oral histories, combats dangerous hate speech and provides psychosocial support in the Rhino Camp of Refugees in Northern Uganda. As a part of its subgrant project, the GLOSIPAD team engaged youth from two divided communities living in the Rhino Camp (the Nuer and the Dinka communities) to share their experience of conflict and forced displacement and promote peace-building and reconciliation efforts. GLOSIPAD invested a lot of time to meet and discuss with the different groups from both communities,

including community leaders, youth representatives, women leaders and religious leaders, to build trust and gain their support for the project.

**The National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTHT)** strives to promote Taiwan’s cultural identity and offer a deep and multifaceted understanding of contemporary Taiwanese history and society. As an island nation, Taiwan has historically welcomed immigrants from different eras, resulting in the formation of a diverse immigrant society. But the voices of immigrants have historically been marginalized. As a part of its subgrant project, the NMTHT team worked with the Tibetan communities in exile to amplify their voices and build a more inclusive public narrative in Taiwanese society. In a context where the relationship between the Tibetan government in exile and the government of Taiwan has been ambiguous and sensitive—and where China political influence is growing—the team initially focused on building trust and recognition of the Dalai Lama Foundation and the embassy of the Tibetan government in exile in Taiwan. With their official support, the NMTHT



National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTHT), Taiwan

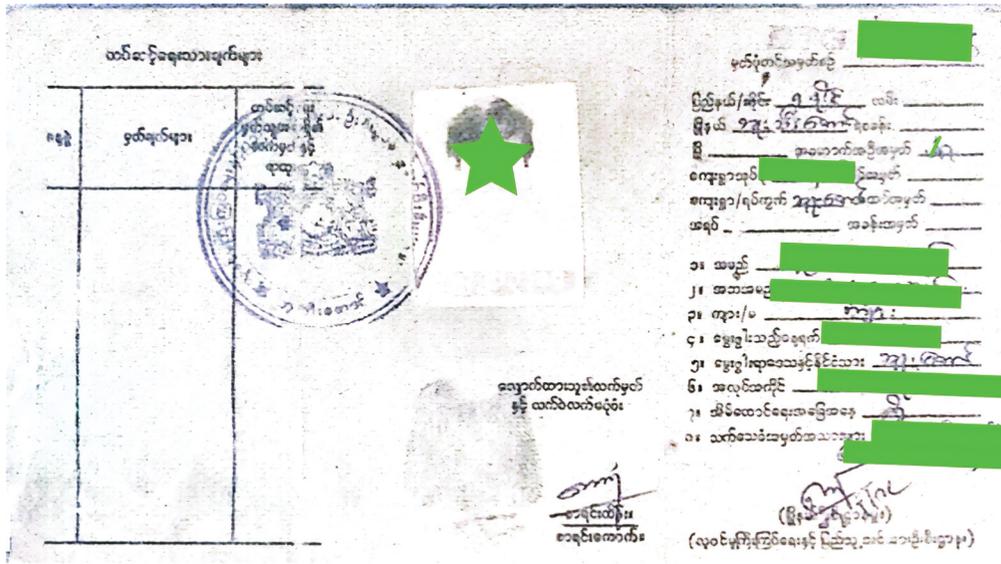
team then engaged with community members and co-created with them a safe space and empowered storytelling methods (e.g., music and dance) to express their personal experiences of exile and displacement—and in doing so, ensuring that the project will not reinforce the voice of the community’s representatives but rather will provide a platform for marginalized voices in the community to express and gain agency over their narrative.

# INCLUSIVE, EMPOWERING AND PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

Inclusive, empowering and participatory practices help shift social perceptions about marginalized communities, thereby countering discrimination and violence. Documentation and memorialization initiatives grounded in such practices aim to ensure that silenced voices are heard, encourage self-representation and enhance self-agency, thus helping reshape harmful narratives, foster new understandings and promote avenues for healing the wounds of the past, with the ultimate goal of social transformation. This section looks in more detail into each of these approaches.

## Defining Inclusive, Empowering and Participatory Practices

**Inclusive Practice:** Inclusive practice embraces all people irrespective of their identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, social class, nationality, religion, age, mental or physical disability, mental or physical illness and other identities. It is about giving equal access and opportunities and getting rid of discrimination and intolerance.<sup>3</sup> Adopting inclusive practices in documentation and memorialization means ensuring the participation of multiple voices, especially the voices and experiences of people who are marginalized and made invisible in society. Documentation and memorialization practices that are not inclusive can have harmful effects, deepening divides and discrimination. There is an absolute need to build inclusive narratives that amplify marginalized voices and offer diverse alternatives to harmful “official hegemonic narratives.”



Rohingya Human Rights Network, Canada and Bangladesh

**Empowering Practice:** The practice of empowerment is the process of enabling individuals to feel safe, gain agency and speak out. When dealing with human rights violations and trauma, it's crucial to adopt trauma-informed approaches and develop practices that empower victims. Telling one's story can be powerful and transformative (rather than retraumatizing) if done in a sensitive way and if it enables victims and survivors to regain control over their narrative. This requires devising adapted methods to engage victims and survivors by considering their specific cultural practices, needs and challenges.

**Participatory Practice:** Participatory practice includes a range of activities that enable ordinary people to play an active and influential part in decisions that affect their lives. This means people are not just listened to, but also heard; and that their voices shape outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Participatory practices go beyond consultation and collaboration, and entail establishing a dialogue with victims and survivors and co-creating with them in all aspects of the process, including sharing power in decision-making. It demands deep, targeted engagement rather than token, superficial or partial participation and can only emerge from the building of trust and close relationships and the development of a safe space for its people to participate in.

### Why Is Adopting Inclusive, Empowering and Participatory Practices Important?

Adopting inclusive, empowering and participatory practices is important to:

- capture multiple perspectives and needs, especially those of marginalized and silenced groups, and to foster more nuanced and multifaceted narratives and enable the development of effective comprehensive and inclusive public policies and procedures;
- support survivors and victims in their healing process by regaining agency on their narrative; and
- leverage the unique expertise and perspectives of victims and survivors.

## Examples of Inclusive, Empowering and Participatory Practices

### São Paulo State Immigration Museum (Brazil)

**The São Paulo State Immigration Museum**, in Brazil, opened in 1993 to tell the stories of European immigrants and their families. Housed in the former Bras Immigrant Hostelry that played an important role in past migration policies targeted at the “whitening” of the Brazilian population, the museum realized that the immigration narratives represented in the museum are biased toward the stories of European, Middle Eastern, and Asian immigrants and their descendants within Brazil's São Paulo State population and systematically omitted narratives of Afro-Brazilians and Original Peoples, understood today as narratives of forced migration. This bias is a legacy of Brazil's “whitening” policies and colonial history, which contributed to marginalizing the Afro-Brazilians and Original Peoples and omitting them from the historical records. Since its re-opening in 2014, the museum has interrogated these connections and silences in Brazil's official migration history, as well as its consequences for social cohesion. Today, it aims to present an inclusive narrative and heritage and reveal the crucial role this inclusion can play in countering discrimination and racism in Brazilian society today.

### The Women's Rights Initiative (WORI) (Uganda)

**The Women's Rights Initiative** (WORI), in Uganda, is a non-governmental organization that runs shelters for survivors of gender-based violence and documents gender-based violations. For years, WORI prioritized the collection of information for accountability purposes over women's needs and personal stories. This approach carried the risk of unintended harm on women by essentializing and reducing them to their status of victims, and also excluded women with particularly difficult narratives who did not feel safe sharing their story. WORI reconsidered its documentation practices and adopted alternative storytelling methods that share the narratives of women

in a sensitive, empowering, and transformative way. WORl organized training sessions for its staff and survivors to build their knowledge on the different approaches to and techniques of storytelling (interviews, body mapping, self-recording, etc.). Based on this training, participating survivors decided which method they wanted to use to tell their own story and how, where, and when it should be displayed.

### **The Women’s Institute for Alternative Development (WINAD) (Trinidad and Tobago)**

**The Women’s Institute for Alternative Development** (WINAD), in Trinidad and Tobago, embarked in 2022 to develop a new museum and memorial of Women’s Contribution to Leadership and Development in Trinidad and Tobago to empower women and challenge stereotypes and discrimination against women. In the process, WINAD realized that its role was more than presenting women’s histories: that women’s stories need to be told by themselves rather than shared on “behalf of women” and that women have ownership by taking part in decision-making at the onset of the museum development. WINAD established a Coordination Committee constituted by representatives of different communities for developing community participatory procedures at all levels of the museum development and in all aspects of its work.

# ADOPTING INCLUSIVE, EMPOWERING AND PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES WITH FORCIBLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

Adopting inclusive, empowering, and participatory practices to document and memorialize the experiences of forcibly displaced people can be deeply transformative and lead to profound positive change by creating inclusive narratives that have the power to promote healing for forcibly displaced people as well as to shift perceptions of society and policymakers. This section looks in more detail into how to adopt inclusive, empowering and participatory practices with forcibly displaced people.

## **Ensure Marginalized Voices Among Forcibly Displaced People Are Included**

Building inclusive narratives of forced displacement means ensuring the participation of multiple voices, especially the voices and experiences of groups who are the most marginalized and made more invisible in society, including women, LGBTQIA+ communities, the disabled, children, ethnic and religious minorities and those forcibly displaced living as refugees in internally displaced camps.

Within forcibly displaced people, some groups are more excluded than others. To be truly inclusive, it is crucial to map those voices and create the conditions for them to engage.

To do so, it is important to reflect on the challenges and barriers that hinder their self-agency and ability to fully participate.

### Challenges and Barriers to Engaging Forcibly Displaced People:

- Serious emotional obstacles tied to trauma that may persist;
- Lack of security and safety for those coming forward, particularly internally displaced persons who are still in a conflict zone or people living under repressive regimes;
- No freedom of movement in many forced displacement situations (camps, settlements, etc.);
- Financial burden and prioritization of basic survival needs;
- Lack of agency of marginalized groups that feel disempowered (youth, children, etc.);
- Lack of information about human rights, trauma and normalization of trauma;
- Social stigma and negative stereotypes, which creates prejudicial conditions (e.g., talking about personal experience and trauma could bring shame to the family and the community);
- Lack of trust that prevents people from participating and that causes fragmentation of forcibly displaced lead efforts;
- Language and cultural differences; and
- Barriers to accessing relevant information, data, networks and resources

To engage with marginalized groups, good intentions are not enough. It is important to consider the following:

- Provide a safe space for the group members to express and process trauma;
- Invest time in building trust;
- Constantly assess safety risks and develop mitigation strategies;
- Think about intersectionality and consider everything and anything that can be a barrier to participation, including gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. and employ gender-/ethnic-/racial-/religious-sensitive approaches;
- Work to understand and identify unconscious and deep-rooted biases and other discriminatory practices that can be present within the project's team;
- Employ a lexicon and language adapted to the group;
- Recognize and challenge all forms of power within the group and pay attention to gendered meta narratives and social construction;
- Pay attention to persons whose gender identity, including their gender expression, is at odds with what is perceived as being the gender norm;
- Provide referrals to appropriate support services and financial support when possible; and
- Raise awareness about human rights and trauma and provide access to relevant information, data, networks and resources.

**The Afghanistan Forensic Science Organization (AFSO)** is the first non-governmental forensic science organization in Afghanistan. Its mission is to advocate for the protection of human rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law. By using documentation and forensic sciences, AFSO has been instrumental in documenting forced disappearances and mass graves from the Afghanistan civil war and other armed conflicts of the past four decades. As a part of its subgrant project, the AFSO team documented the human rights violations against the Hazara community

of Khas Urozgan in Afghanistan that forced them to exile. The objective was to support this historically discriminated community to shape their narratives and pursue truth, justice and accountability. The AFSO team focused on creating a safe environment to engage individuals to share their testimonies and participate in advocating for their rights. To build trust, the team worked through local networks, social activists and community leaders who introduced the project and the team and facilitated discussions. The interviews were conducted in safe and private settings, ensuring anonymity of the participants, who were very concerned about the security of their relatives in Afghanistan.

## Adopt Empowering Storytelling Methods

Interviews are the most common method for people to share information about an event or their personal experience. But alternative storytelling methods exist that can be truly empowering and deeply transformative for victims and survivors. They have the potential to support forcibly displaced people in their healing process by regaining agency in their narrative

It is crucial to gain in-depth knowledge of the participants in order to choose the appropriate storytelling method that will keep them safe and also empower them.

### Alternative Storytelling Methods:

**Body Mapping:** This is the process of creating body maps using drawing, painting, or other media to reflect on and visually express one's personal and embodied life experiences. It creates a safe space for participants to remember and express their experiences in order to achieve a level of healing from their painful memories.

**Storytelling Through Personal Objects:** This is another form of memorialization, wherein the participants share personal objects related to their experience. These objects convey the emotional charge of their experience, especially the experience of loss that it is often difficult to communicate through words.

**Storytelling Through Art:** Artistic expression is an opportunity for victims and survivors to tell their stories and experiences, especially children who do not yet have the words to express themselves, or with marginalized groups who feel disempowered.

**Focus Group Discussion (FGD):** This consists of dialogues between 6–10 people, guided by a facilitator. The purpose of these dialogues is to obtain in-depth information on the participants' perceptions or experiences with a particular topic/range of topics. When participants feel unsafe to speak about their personal experience, FGD provides a safe environment, as sensitive topics can be introduced and talked about in indirect ways.



Afghan Refugees Solidarity Association (ARSA), Turkey

## Create Collaborative Decision-making and Co-creation Processes

Engaging forcibly displaced people in collaborative decision-making and co-creation processes is crucial in order to better answer their needs, give them agency in a forced displacement narrative, and leverage their unique expertise and perspectives. This means going beyond token consultation or superficial or partial participation; rather, it requires setting up an equitable multiparty decision-making structure wherein people are empowered to decide what is best for themselves. This includes the following:

- Building an equal relationship;
- Adapting to the group's social codes, values, knowledge and structures, as it can operate on the basis of a different set of values, norms and practices;
- Taking the time to establish considerate relationships with the group and a dialogue to negotiate ways of co-creating in an equitable manner;
- Developing effective communication methods between participants;
- Ensuring co-ownership during the implementation of the project; and
- Ensuring co-ownership of the project's outputs.

**The Rohingya Human Rights Network** (RHRN), in Canada, is a network of Rohingya activists, speakers, and writers from refugee camps and other diaspora that raise awareness of the plight of the Rohingya. As a part of its subgrant project, the RHRN team worked on documenting Rohingya villages and sites of cultural significance inside Myanmar that have been erased by the Myanmar government and that no longer appear on maps. The objective is to counter the official narrative that denies the Rohingya's history and existence in Myanmar by establishing an online interactive publicly accessible database wherein exterminated Rohingya villages will be shown with associated documents such as identification cards, census cards, and photos of mosques, schools, cemeteries, etc. preserved by Rohingya survivors in refugee camps. The RHRN team focused its efforts on empowering the Rohingyas in the camps to document by themselves their villages and sites that have cultural significance for them and foster ownership of the project.

**The Afghan Refugees Solidarity Association** (ARSA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing support and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey. As a part of its subgrant project, the ARSA team launched the initiative "Children with Backpacks" that engaged forcibly displaced children to tell their experience through artistic expression. The profound psychological and emotional impact experienced by forcibly displaced children and the lack of appropriate support exacerbates their emotional distress and hinders their personal development. Throughout the organization of 10 workshops, the project provided a safe and nurturing environment wherein forcibly displaced Afghan children in Turkey gained confidence and were able to express themselves through art.

**Mujer Diaspora** is an initiative to empower Colombian women in the diaspora to become agents of change both in the Colombian peace process and in their host countries. It aims to contribute to healing the trauma caused by both the armed conflict as well as the migration process; ensure the lived experiences of the diaspora community informs the formal truth, memory and reconciliation initiatives in Colombia; and improve integration of the diaspora in the host countries. As a part of its subgrant project, the Mujer Diaspora team engaged with 20 Colombian women victims of the Colombian conflict living in exile in London and Barcelona. All these women had a retraumatizing experience when giving their testimony before the Colombian truth commission in charge of investigating the conflict-related atrocities. Through literacy-creation workshops, they gathered to share and reflect on their experiences and the resilience strategies they developed over years. The final product of these workshops will be shared with forcibly displaced women from other countries as a tool to help them deal with their own traumas and plan victim-centered and victim-led documentation and memorialization processes. Acknowledging these women's experiences and valuing the skills and strategies they developed contributed to their collective healing and empowerment.

### No title

Transitional Justice  
in Spanish  
is a woman,  
but upon finding her,  
the faces of men are unveiled,  
and the ostentation of power.

And in this encounter,  
Me, a woman,  
can only be a victim,  
giving my testimony,  
perhaps a secretary,  
taking notes.

From the power  
behind a desk,  
a tie analyzes my story  
to its liking,  
fragments it  
from the power,  
without humility.

Although we seek the same end,  
You, transitional justice,  
remain feeding powers.  
Me, with the open wound,  
that I have learned to heal.

I approach you  
to become ashes still carrying ember,  
and when joining them with the ashes of other women,  
we can become a giant flame,  
that illuminates  
beyond your tie,  
beyond your desk,  
beyond your borders,  
beyond your vain powers.



### Sin títulos

La justicia transicional  
en español  
es una mujer,  
pero al encontrarla  
se desvela el rostro de hombres,  
y la ostentación de poder.

Y en este encuentro,  
yo mujer  
solo puedo ser víctima,  
dando mi testimonio,  
quizás secretaria,  
tomando apuntes.

Desde el poder  
detrás de un escritorio  
una corbata analiza mi historia  
a su gusto,  
la fragmenta  
desde el poder,  
sin humildad.

Aunque buscamos el mismo fin  
Tu, justicia transicional  
te quedas alimentando poderes.  
Yo con la herida abierta  
que ya se sanar.

Me acerco a ti  
para convertirme en ceniza que aún lleva brasa,  
y que al juntarla con las cenizas de otras mujeres,  
podemos ser un fuego gigante,  
que alumbre  
más allá de tu corbata,  
de tu escritorio,  
de tus vanos poderes.

# CONCLUSION

**Documenting and memorializing experiences of forcibly displaced people by adopting an inclusive and victim-centered approach has the potential to be deeply transformative and lead to profound positive change in society.**

By centering forcibly displaced voices and empowering marginalized groups to have self-agency, we can ensure that their multidimensional needs are met—including their right to truth, justice and accountability—counter hateful and discriminatory narratives that lead to more exclusion and discrimination, and leverage their unique perspective and expertise.

Building an equal and empowering relationship with forcibly displaced people requires time and a deep and long-term investment.

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## Endnotes

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