



TRANSFORMATIVE TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE BRIEF

The role of social movements

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1. Introduction

Conventional transitional justice policy and practice increasingly recognise the importance of participation by civil society organisations and victim groups in addressing legacies of violence and repression. However, less attention has been given to the role of activism and social movements in shaping transformative justice agendas and pushing for broader social and political change.

Social movements often emerge in contexts where formal political transitions are incomplete, blocked, or captured by elites. They can mobilise affected communities and open spaces for alternative visions of justice and democracy. In many contexts, they have played an important role in connecting demands for accountability and truth with broader struggles against inequality and the root causes of violence and socio-economic marginalisation.

This brief explores how social movements have contributed to transformative transitional justice across different political contexts, what enables their impact, which challenges they face, and what policymakers and practitioners can do to support them more effectively.

2. Pushing the boundaries: social movements and transitional justice

Social movements can be understood as collective forms of mobilisation through which people challenge existing power structures, often around shared experiences of repression, injustice, and exclusion. Unlike more formal civil society organisations, movements tend to rely on broad cross-sectoral participation, flexible horizontal or de-centralised structures, and collective action. They often create spaces for more inclusive forms of social interaction and decision-making, thereby fostering solidarity and a shared sense of purpose.

The link between social movements and transformative transitional justice lies in their ability to connect present-day grievances to more structural or historical experiences of injustice. While conventional transitional justice approaches frequently focus on accountability, truth-seeking, and reparations, social movements often connect these demands to wider structural issues such as inequality, socio-economic marginalisation, gender injustice, corruption, or political exclusion. In this sense, they contribute to more transformative approaches to justice that seek not only to address past violations, but also the root causes that enabled them.

In contexts of absent, failed, or incomplete transitions from violent conflict or dictatorship to peace and democracy, social movements can play a particularly important role. Even when they cannot achieve immediate institutional reform, they often preserve justice claims, shape more pluralistic forms of public memory, document abuses, and challenge official narratives that seek to promote impunity or “moving on”. In Myanmar, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) that emerged after the military coup united civil servants, teachers, health care workers, students, and grass-root activists through decentralised, collective non-violent actions, which raised popular consciousness for human rights and democratic governance and fostered new forms of solidarity. Initially focused on resisting military rule, the movement increasingly incorporated demands related to accountability, institutional reform, and ending decades of military impunity. Grassroots activists engaged in documentation and truth-seeking efforts, helping to prepare the ground for future justice processes from below.

Social movements can also play a transformative role in more advanced or formal transitions. They can broaden existing transitional justice agendas, ensure the visibility of survivor perspectives, and push institutions to address structural inequalities. In such contexts, movements may influence public debates, institutional mandates, or legal and institutional reform processes. In Chile, the feminist movement that gained momentum during the social uprising beginning in 2019 connected contemporary grievances around inequality and exclusion with unresolved legacies of dictatorship, patriarchy, and neoliberal reforms. Through broad alliances and strong mobilisation, feminist actors played a key role in shaping the country’s constitutional process and advancing a more inclusive vision of democracy and human rights. Their achievements included the incorporation of gender equality and non-discrimination principles into the draft constitution as well as stronger constitutional protection against gender-based violence. Although the draft constitution was ultimately rejected in a national referendum, the process itself represented an important shift from earlier transitional justice approaches focused mainly on accountability and reparations toward broader questions of structural transformation and social justice.

Across contexts, several success factors emerge that strengthen the transformative impact of social movements. First, legitimacy and rootedness within affected communities are critical. Survivor-led and family-based movements, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina or the widows’ movements in Guatemala, have gained strong moral authority to shape transitional justice processes because of their direct connection to experiences of violence and loss. Second, broad alliances across sectors and social or ethnic groups help movements build momentum, legitimacy, and political influence connecting transitional justice issue with broader demands. Third, adaptability and persistence over time are essential. Successful movements often combine different strategies depending on political opportunities and levels of repression, including protest, litigation, documentation, international advocacy, memorialisation, and community organising.

Fourth, access to formal political or institutional processes can create opportunities for influence when combined with strong grassroots mobilisation.

At the same time, social movements face persistent challenges limiting their ability to contribute to transformative transitional justice. One major difficulty is sustaining mobilisation over time. Movements often emerge during moments of crisis or political opening, but maintaining momentum becomes difficult when repression increases, public attention fades, or political opportunities close. They frequently face criminalisation, burnout, and resource constraints, particularly in authoritarian or conflict-affected contexts. Possible strategies to address this challenge include strengthening peer support and self-care structures as well as effectively distributing roles and tasks.

Another challenge concerns movements' organisational structure. While decentralised, horizontal, and flexible forms of mobilisation enable broad participation and rapid action, movements may struggle to coordinate long-term strategies or engage effectively with formal institutions. Greater formalisation and stronger vertical leadership may enhance coordination and coherent negotiation strategies, but it may also reduce spontaneity and grassroots ownership. In Lebanon, while the 2019 mass protest movement against sectarian governance, corruption, and economic mismanagement remained largely decentralised and fragmented, some activists subsequently channeled their efforts through professional syndicates, creating more structured avenues for coordination and political engagement after the peak of mass mobilisation had passed.

Questions of inclusivity and representation also remain central. To maintain legitimacy and avoid reproducing exclusion, movements need to ensure that diverse perspectives and justice claims are reflected within their agendas. This can be particularly challenging in societies marked by ethnic, religious, or political divisions. Yet moments of broad-based mobilisation can also create opportunities for bridge-building across such divides. In Sri Lanka, the 2022 Aragalaya movement brought together diverse constituencies around demands for accountability, democratic reform, and social justice, while opening greater space for engagement with long-standing minority grievances. Although important differences and tensions remained, the movement demonstrated the potential of cross-ethnic alliances to broaden public debate and promote more inclusive visions of justice and political change.

3. Recommendations

For movement actors and activists:

- **Build sustainable structures without undermining flexibility:** Develop coordination mechanisms that enable continuity, collective decision-making, and strategic engagement while preserving grassroots ownership and adaptability.
- **Protect autonomy, legitimacy, and security:** Develop strategies to reduce risks of repression, surveillance, and political co-optation, including through safety-networks and protection mechanisms for members at heightened risk.
- **Balance transformative visions with incremental gains:** Pursue long-term structural change while identifying achievable short-term objectives that sustain mobilisation, demonstrate progress, and broaden support.

- **Strengthen inclusive representation:** Ensure that minority groups and other marginalised communities are meaningfully included in shaping justice priorities, leadership, and decision-making processes within movements.
- **Build strong alliance across sectors:** Engage in building broad-based coalitions to increase legitimacy, mobilisation and political influence.
- **Prioritise collective care and wellbeing:** Build solidarity and peer support structures to address burnout and sustain long-term engagement.

For practitioners, donors, and policymakers:

- **Recognise movements as legitimate agents of change:** Engage social movements as political actors with their own priorities and strategies.
- **Prioritise accompaniment over control:** Provide technical support, mentoring, strategic advice, and peer-learning opportunities while respecting movement autonomy and decision-making.
- **Support independent and flexible financing:** Invest in movement-owned funding mechanisms, including small grants, solidarity funds, and crowdfunding infrastructures that reduce dependency and preserve autonomy.
- **Sustain support beyond moments of visibility:** Maintain long-term engagement during periods of repression, fragmentation, or declining public attention, when movements are often most vulnerable.
- **Promote inclusive participation:** Ensure that support reaches movement members representing marginalised groups and contributes to more inclusive visions of justice.
- **Create spaces for reflection, learning and alliance-building:** Facilitate safe spaces for exchange across movements, regions, and generations to strengthen strategic learning, solidarity, and collective action.
- **Support ecosystem approach:** Encourage complementarity between informal movements, community-based actors, professional associations and civil society organisations rather than imposing standard models.

This brief is based on lessons learned and recommendations drawn from the 2025 practitioners' conference [Transformative Transitional Justice in Practice: Confronting Challenges, Recognising Successes](#), complemented by additional research and analysis.

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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