



TRANSFORMATIVE TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE BRIEF

Trauma-informed intergenerational approaches

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1. Introduction

It has become widely accepted that transitional justice should be victim-centred, placing survivors at the centre of efforts to address the legacies of violence and authoritarian rule. Central to this is the recognition that mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) must be embedded within transitional justice processes to deal with the immediate and enduring effects of violence.

Being able to confront experiences of violence is an important step in restoring the agency of survivors. Yet the effects of traumatic experiences do not remain confined to the generation that directly experienced atrocities. Silence, stigma, and unresolved pain are transmitted across time, influencing how societies remember, relate, and respond to violence. For transitional justice to have transformative effects for victims and societies at large, it must therefore account for the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

This brief highlights the relevance of trauma-informed intergenerational approaches for healing, transformative change, and sustainable peace as well as the risks associated with ignoring the transgenerational effects of trauma. It concludes by offering concrete recommendations for practitioners and donors on designing and implementing transformative transitional justice measures.

2. Breaking cycles of harm for future generations

Traumatic experiences do not end when violence stops. Their effects persist, affecting social relations, political behaviour, and socioeconomic disparities. Unaddressed trauma can undermine mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, erode trust in institutions and in others, and fuel polarisation. Crucially, persisting trauma can be manipulated by political actors seeking to mobilise fear, resentment, or grievance, thereby increasing the risk of renewed violence. In the Western Balkans, younger generations

born after the wars of the 1990s have shown rising nationalist sentiments that political actors actively instrumentalise, drawing on unresolved trauma to mobilise support. Transitional justice processes that overlook these dynamics risk perpetuating the psychosocial conditions underlying cycles of harm.

The effects of traumatic experiences extend across generations. Children and young people often carry the emotional, social, and even biological consequences of violence they did not personally witness. Children born of wartime rape are a stark example: they may face stigma, identity struggles, and inherited trauma linked to events that predate their birth. More broadly, younger generations may inherit vulnerabilities that shape their sense of identity and belonging as well as their relationship to the past.

One of the greatest challenges in addressing transgenerational trauma is that it is rarely spoken about openly. Intra-psychological coping mechanism can lead people to disassociate or avoid confronting traumatic experiences out of fear of overwhelming emotions in the absence of professional support. On the community level, stigma surrounding mental health is widespread in post-conflict settings, and many survivors feel shame or fear judgement if they disclose their experiences. Others struggle with survivors' guilt, believing they have no right to speak about psychological suffering when others endured greater physical harm. These dynamics create layers of silence that make it difficult for traumatic experiences to be acknowledged or addressed. In Cambodia, for example, stigma surrounding trauma remains deeply entrenched, making intergenerational dialogue particularly difficult and limiting opportunities for young people to discuss how wounds from the past continue to shape their lives. In such contexts, younger generations lack the language, permission, or safe spaces to articulate how multilayered experiences of trauma are passed down within families and become ingrained in communities.

Intergenerational dialogue about traumatic experiences is therefore essential. Trauma-informed transitional justice must create opportunities for survivors, parents, elders and young people to engage in shared processes of addressing legacies of the past. Such dialogue helps identify the ongoing psychological and social effects of past violence and enables families as well as communities to understand how traumatic experiences shape present-day conditions—including socioeconomic prospects. In Burundi, intergenerational dialogue formats brought together elders and youth to link conflict-related trauma with young people's concerns about education, livelihoods, and employment opportunities. Adopting a trauma-informed approach to address the interlinkages between transgenerational harm and marginalisation can mobilise and transform the agency of young people, enabling them to shape a different future.

Trauma-informed intergenerational work can have transformative effects by breaking cycles of stigma and violence. It can help caregivers and youth to name how stress manifests at home, enabling healthier parenting and caregiving practices. At the same time, these dialogues can shift divisive conflict narratives passed down between generations by replacing inherited blame and fear with shared understanding and empathy. Finally, they provide the opportunity to connect personal suffering to historical and socioeconomic conditions such as displacement, loss of livelihoods, or exclusion so that healing is paired with addressing root causes rather than just symptoms.

Engaging perpetrators is also essential for dealing with trauma effectively. Survivors often seek acknowledgement of both the physical and psychological harm inflicted. When perpetrators recognise

and articulate their responsibility for these harms, it can support victims' healing and contribute to rebuilding trust. At the same time, the long-term effects of violence on perpetrators must also be addressed. In Colombia, national reintegration efforts have recognised that former combatants often carry deep psychological burdens; addressing their mental health is considered essential to helping them avoid resorting to violence again. A comprehensive trauma-informed approach recognises that sustainable peace requires understanding the full spectrum of harm, including the ways in which perpetrators themselves may carry trauma that, if ignored, can perpetuate cycles of violence and severely limit communities' ability to proactively problem-solve around issues they face collectively.

3. Recommendations

To practitioners:

- **Conduct trauma-informed assessments of MHPSS needs** and resources across generations and ensure all transitional justice processes prioritise safety, confidentiality, and the prevention of re-traumatisation. Provide quiet spaces, clear boundaries, and expert accompaniment for victims.
- **Integrate art, storytelling, theatre, and other creative methods** to help participants express traumatic experiences. Collaborate with artists and community-based groups to design accessible formats.
- **Bring people from different generations together** in spaces that are familiar and meaningful to them (physically, socially, and emotionally).
- **Focus on shared experiences and values** rather than fixed identities to bridge divides and foster connection across generations, particularly in highly polarised contexts.
- **Ensure that intergenerational processes eventually involve all sides**, including perpetrators, to support acknowledgement, accountability, and collective healing.

To donors:

- **Prioritise MHPSS within all transitional justice processes** and allocate sufficient, long-term resources for trauma-informed capacity building.
- **Support trauma-responsive processes at multiple levels** that combine individual therapy, family-based interventions, community dialogues, and structural reforms in line with the MHPSS intervention pyramid.
- **Link MHPSS to structural remedies** by coordinating psychosocial support with legal aid, land restitution, education reform, and material reparations.
- **Pay close attention to timing**, recognising that readiness to engage with traumatic experiences varies across individuals and communities.
- **Invest in public spaces**, such as exhibitions, memorials, and cultural forums that enable communities to engage with intergenerational trauma in accessible and meaningful ways.

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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