



WHAT IS

A TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION?

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**A FOCUS ON
SOCIETAL
LISTENING
AND PUBLIC
HISTORY**

One way to describe a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is as a listening exercise.

TRCs are intended to strengthen democracy, peace, and human rights by, at least in part, *listening*: listening to members of a community who have not been adequately heard and, as a consequence, who have experienced marginalization or invisibility that can make it easier for societies to harm them. Listening is a form of recognition and inclusion, and listening leads to the creation of new narratives that can help redefine societies and change behavior.

Truth and Reconciliation commissions (often called simply “truth commissions”) and related initiatives have been established in societies whose members have been victims of atrocities such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, or other forms of severe societal trauma such as, for example, the experience of torture and forced disappearance in Argentina, the repression, violence, and institutional racism of Apartheid in South Africa, or the cultural genocide of First Nation and indigenous peoples who predate the modern country of Canada. In the United States, there has never been a national TRC, but local initiatives are emerging in many states, often to examine **racial injustice** or the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade.

There have been dozens of TRCs in every world region over the past 40 years — perhaps most famously, for example, in South Africa, Chile, and Canada — and each one is unique. In addition to formal TRCs established by governments, there have been hundreds, if not thousands, of civil society initiatives established by nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, community organizations, universities, and victims’ associations that resemble truth commissions.



Memria.org is a digital storytelling platform for gathering testimony and autobiographical narratives. This paper emerges from our experience working with numerous TRCs and similar initiatives, and our reflections on the ways in which TRCs can be seen as — and improve their work as — entities dedicated to societal listening.

Responding to periods or episodes of extraordinary violence, TRCs have been created as part of a strategy to address these past events and move forward; in other words, to confront the past in order to build a better future. Truth commissions have various goals. Perhaps most frequently, commissions are understood as being linked to concepts of justice, broadly speaking, often framed as one component of a broader strategy of **transitional justice**, or sometimes working toward **restorative justice**. They are also seen as elements of a strategy of Never Again (or “**non-repetition**”) of the kinds of crimes that were committed in the past.

STORYTELLING

Truth commissions can also be seen as entities that help construct new societal (or community-based) narratives that frame and guide the ways we understand, interpret, and pass along past experiences. After a period of violence, societies have to grapple with the question of how to tell the story of what happened and why. These moments of transition are important because powerful people in societies have a vested interest in telling this story in particular ways. Moreover, societies maintain their structure of power, partly, by maintaining control over what is told and what is hidden; who is celebrated and who is forgotten. Conscious storytelling can address this challenge. New narratives may embrace the possibility of a different societal order; emphasizing the value of hidden or marginalized stories enhances the worth of those whose lives have so far been disrespected or unrecognized.

Poster designed by the Colombian Truth Commission explaining its work



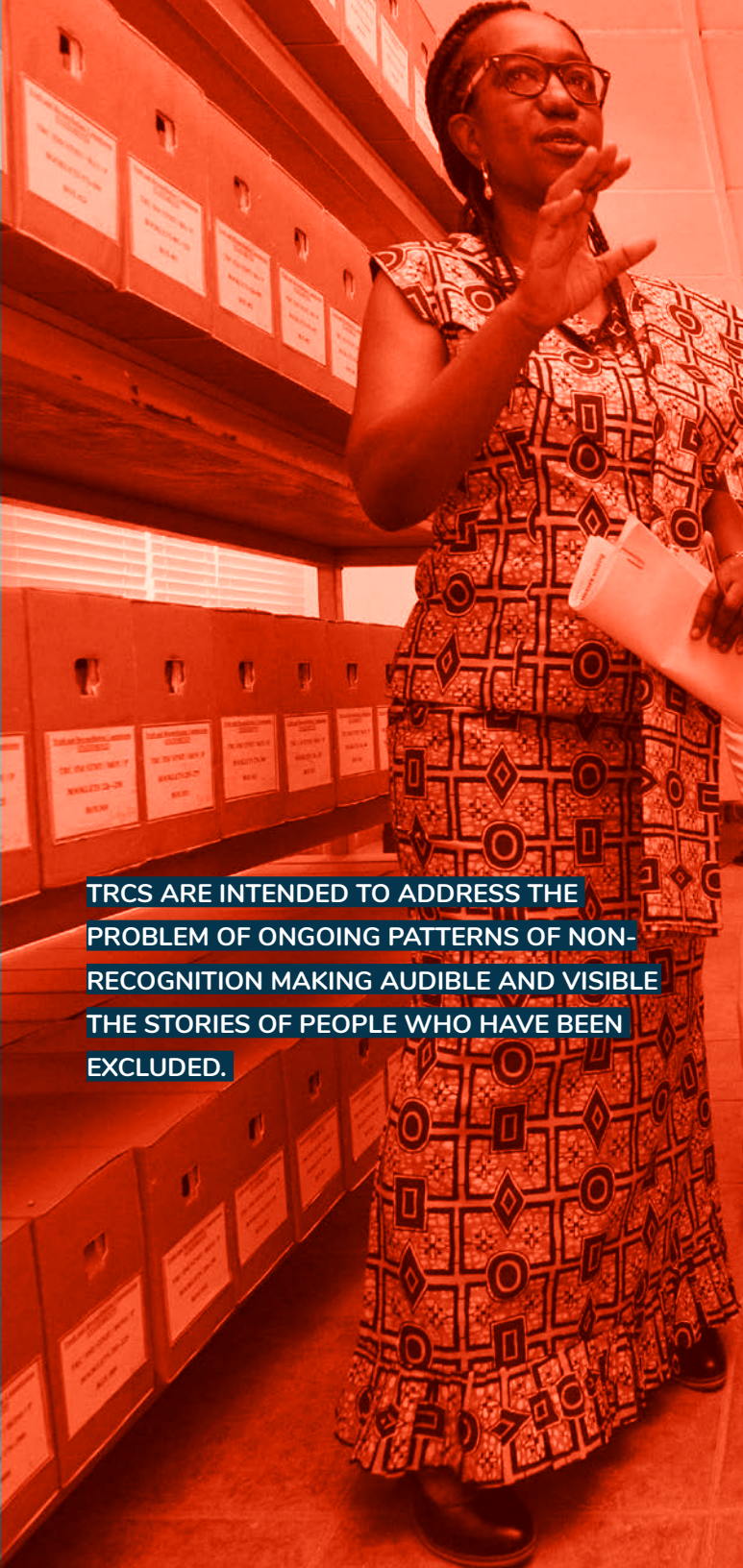
THE MEMRIA PLATFORM MAKES IT EXCEPTIONALLY EASY FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO GATHER, CURATE, AND SHARE AUDIO STORIES FOR ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE EFFORTS, AND OTHER PROFESSIONAL STORYSHARING PROJECTS.

At Memria, we have been working for many years designing and refining tools and methods to improve the ways we listen to each other, including through truth-telling initiatives. At the core of our work is the importance of stories, which we define as personal autobiographical accounts narrated by people in their own voice.

By listening to the voices, testimonies, and stories of those most directly affected, TRCs help to construct new narratives about the past and can help to change mindsets. In this sense, TRCs fit into the broad category of storytelling. They both listen to stories (testimonies) and aggregate those stories to show a broader view of the past — ideally one that can help us avoid similar periods of violence in the future.

With their focus on listening, TRCs can be seen as public history initiatives that use **storylistening and storysharing** to shift the way we collectively talk about the past. By listening to the accounts of those who lived through violence, or who have suffered from the legacies of violence in the past, we can create more inclusive and more accurate narratives about our history. For example, a formal truth commission is currently underway in Victoria, Australia — the Yoorrook Justice Commission — which aims, among other goals, to “develop a shared understanding among all Victorians of the impact of colonisation, as well as the diversity, strength and resilience of First Peoples’ cultures.”

Similarly, after a brutal dictatorship ended in Chile in 1990, a TRC sought to influence the way in which the dictatorship would be narrated in Chilean collective memory. And the TRC had an impact. Today, it is virtually impossible to deny the fact that the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet was responsible for the torture of more than 40,000 people and the deaths of at least 3,000 more between 1973-1989.



TRCS ARE INTENDED TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF ONGOING PATTERNS OF NON-RECOGNITION MAKING AUDIBLE AND VISIBLE THE STORIES OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN EXCLUDED.

WHAT DO TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS DO?

Seen from the perspective of “listening,” TRCs address one or more of the following problems in the aftermath of violence in an effort to strengthen democracy and peace:

NON-RECOGNITION or disregard of the experiences and the full humanity of fellow members of a community. TRCs assume that recognition is, itself, one of the most important qualities in human interaction. Being recognized by fellow humans is a necessary component of belonging, inclusion, and shared identity. A society or community that does not acknowledge the violence experienced by members of that community is showing disrespect. One of the best ways to recognize someone is to listen to them.

TRCs are intended to address the problem of ongoing patterns of non-recognition making audible and visible the stories of people who have been excluded.

LIES The earliest TRCs came into existence because governments were lying to family members and friends about the whereabouts of their loved ones, many of whom had been killed or “disappeared” by repressive governments. When family members asked state authorities, in good faith, about their sons, daughters, parents, or colleagues, they met with lies and obfuscations. Living with this uncertainty provoked these anguished people to call for “truth.” As the great public intellectual Michael Ignatieff has said, TRCs can help to “limit the range of permissible lies” in a society.





INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION ABOUT PAST EVENTS. In societies recovering from mass atrocity, many people are charged with gathering factual information and evidence about the past. This might include lawyers, journalists, historians, and mental health practitioners, as well as family members of victims. During periods of violence, this information is often not accessible. For example, by focusing on testimonials about victims' experiences as well as preserving archives from the so-called "Years of Lead" (1960s-1980s) in Morocco, the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in Morocco was able to document the torture and killing that had taken place at various clandestine detention centers around the country.

MARGINALIZATION AND INVISIBILITY. Violence affects rural indigenous communities more than those in elite urban society. Violence affects the poor more than the rich. Violence affects both men and women, but the violence against women is often different and acknowledged less — and less often — than violence against men. Moreover, patterns of marginalization, invisibility, exclusion, or discrimination can be reinforced by violence, and certain communities can become even more marginalized as a result of that violence. By telling the stories of marginalized groups before, during, and after periods of societal trauma, TRCs and related initiatives can help provoke changes in policy and practices, such as reparations, that will help address these ongoing legacies.



HOW DO TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS WORK?

Commissions and related TRC-like initiatives can take multiple forms. In general, they exist for a specified period of time (such as 2-3 years) and are mandated to explore the causes and consequences of periods of extraordinary violence in the past in an objective and nonpartisan way.

The commissioners on TRCs are, ideally, highly respected and nonpartisan members of society, such as university presidents, former judges, civil society leaders, or senior officials of religious or civic institutions. The commissioners oversee a staff of professionals from disciplines such as law, journalism, history, and sociology whose job it is to research the period under investigation. Usually, this includes interviewing witnesses to and survivors of acts of violence. The testimonies of victims is thus a vital part of gathering information, acknowledging the violence inflicted on them, and confronting the lies of perpetrators and their allies.

Truth commissions are not courts. They are often complementary to legal proceedings but they exist outside the formal judicial system and they have a different mandate and a separate set of goals. For example, courts focus on perpetrators of crimes. Victims of those crimes participate in legal proceedings under highly structured rules that are meant to either support an accusation of wrongdoing by a perpetrator or defend that perpetrator from such an accusation. And courts are confrontational, traditionally based on an adversarial system. By contrast, TRCs usually do not focus on the perpetrators. Instead, they provide a space for victims and survivors to be heard and for their stories to be preserved and entered into the official record.





TRUTH COMMISSIONS AND PUBLIC HISTORY

In the United States and numerous other countries around the world, including the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, there is a renewed interest in truth and reconciliation initiatives to deal with long-term legacies of violence committed in the past—often in the distant past. Like the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which examined a 100-year period starting in the late 1800s to unearth and share the traumatic experiences inflicted on indigenous peoples through the Residential School System, these new initiatives may delve deeper into the historical past. By taking more of a *longue durée* approach, they seek to uncover patterns and legacies that endure considerably beyond the events under examination.

The connection between truth commissions and public history is clear. As we write in our publication, [Why Do Public History](#), “Public history, done responsibly, can make major contributions to civic life by elucidating hidden aspects of our past, and by teaching us ‘who we are’ in constructive ways. We can learn lessons from history and understand how we got to where we are. Public history can lead to empathy and understanding and can help strengthen democratic values. By listening to the stories of our past, we can build a better future”. Truth commissions make contributions to our understanding of the past.





HOW TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS HELP IMPROVE THE FUTURE

There are at least three ways that TRCs seek to contribute to building a more peaceful, less violent future.

- Throughout their work — during public events, press conferences, public hearings, outreach to communities, and the process of creating a final report — TRCs seek to create a new “story of us” that rejects future violence and emphasizes human rights and respect for individuals. In order to do this, truth commissions collect stories (often called “testimonies”) from individuals and then analyze, aggregate, and synthesize these individual stories to tell larger stories about the past. At the top of this pyramid of stories is the “story of us:” Who are we as a society? As a community? As a nation? These new master narratives can help to frame the ways in which entire societies understand their past, ideally in ways that can help prevent similar violence in the future. In some cases, the TRC’s final report can become an important influence in the way a society tells the story of its past. For example, in Argentina, a popular version of that country’s TRC report, *Nunca Más*, became a bestseller and is still widely available.
- Final reports usually conclude with a set of concrete recommendations for how governments can work to avoid violence in the future. For example, the reports might recommend that all military personnel or members of the police force undergo training in human rights. Or they might recommend renewed enforcement of laws prohibiting such activities as torture, or recommend new legislation to protect the vulnerable.
- Or they might suggest that new school curricula be introduced to encourage students to learn to resolve disputes amicably.



- TRCs might also influence future behavior by building empathy for victims and humanizing them in ways that might discourage future perpetrators of violence. By confronting invisibility throughout its work and making audible the stories of those who have experienced violence, a TRC can help to destigmatize and legitimize marginalized members of a community and help create a more inclusive sense of belonging.
- Finally, truth commissions and related initiatives raise profound questions of power: how economic, cultural, and political power is distributed in society and how societal dynamics lead to violence. In this sense, TRCs are likely to dig deeper than, for example, courts in assigning historical responsibility for mass atrocity. TRCs have, among other things, delved into the responsibility or complicity of entire sectors of society (like the business sector, the role of mass media, the medical establishment) as well as historical patterns of wealth accumulation.

VIVAVOZ

In 2019, the Colombian government established a truth commission, known as the CEV (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición) to investigate the root causes and the devastating consequences of the armed conflict that started in 1964 and formally ended with a peace agreement in 2016, and to make recommendations for preventing conflict in the future.

Francisco de Roux Rengifo, President of the Colombian Truth Commission, during a Dialogue Session in Bogota, Colombia, 2019.



As the CEV was getting off the ground, commission staff approached **Memria** to explore ways in which the Memria digital storytelling platform might be useful for their work. The project was based on listening to communities affected by the Colombian conflict and creating storysharing mechanisms to support the work of the CEV. The result was the **VivaVoz project**, intended to help to shape societal narratives about the future with an emphasis on stories that can broaden the imagination about the possibility of sustainable peace. By seeking real examples of inspiration, hope, and dialogue — and with an emphasis on problem-solving, cooperation, and shared interests — the project worked with dozens of local and community-based audiovisual producers. Over three years, VivaVoz collected and shared hundreds of testimonials in the form of audio, video, podcasts, and multimedia content, attracting seven million unique views, which helped reinforce the work being done by the commission. This public history was disseminated through 30+ community radio stations, media outlets, and partner organizations.



Patricia Tobón Yagarí,
Commissioner,
Colombian Truth
Commission, being
interviewed by the
press



VivaVoz Fellows attend an event of the
Colombian Truth Commission, 2019



CONCLUSION

Truth commissions and related initiatives, such as community-based truth-telling initiatives and civil society efforts, are experiencing a wave of interest worldwide, especially as new initiatives turn their attention to structural violence and historical episodes of mass atrocity, like the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade in North America or the cultural genocide of indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada, and the United States.

There are multiple ways to define the goals of these initiatives. Perhaps most commonly, they are understood as efforts aimed at a broad concept of justice. But they can also be seen as strategies to clarify the narratives we tell ourselves about *who we are*, how history has shaped us, and who we want to be in the future. The idea of shifting narratives to be more inclusive (and more accurate) has become increasingly important in the design and implementation of truth commissions. At the heart of this idea is listening to each other.

Collecting, sharing, and listening to stories and narratives of members of our communities can help us accomplish broader social justice goals such as accountability for mass violence, future measures to prevent atrocity, and teaching our children and societies how violence emerges, in an effort to prevent it in the future.

Graffiti calling attention to victims of forcible disappearance during the conflict in Colombia



FURTHER READING

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-Repitition, see “publications.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-truth-justice-reparation-and-non-recurrence>

Ashley Quarcoo and Medina Husaković, 2021, Racial Reckoning in the United States: Expanding and Innovating on the Global Transitional Justice Experience (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202110-Quarcoo_Racial_Reckoning_final.pdf

Jeremy Sarkin (Ed.), 2019, The Global Impact and Legacy of Truth Commissions (Intersentia. doi:10.1017/9781780687957)

Leigh A. Payne, 2017, “Report on Truth Commissions and Corporate Complicity”(Justiceinfo.net) <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/31545-report-on-truth-commissions-and-corporate-complicity.html>

Clara Ramírez-Barat (ed) , 2014, Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society: Beyond Outreach (Social Science Research Council) <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/transitional-justice-and-development-beyond-outreach/>

Eduardo González and Howard Varney (eds), 2013, Truth Seeking: Elements of Creating an Effective Truth Commission (ICTJ) <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Book-Truth-Seeking-2013-English.pdf>

Louis Bickford, Patricia Karam, Hassan Mneimneh and Patrick Pierce, 2009, Documenting Truth, (International Center for Transitional Justice, ICTJ) <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-DAG-Global-Documenting-Truth-2009-English.pdf>

Teresa Godwin Phelps, 2004, Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

For a list of TRCs worldwide, as of 2011, see the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Truth Commission Digital Collection: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2011/03/truth-commission-digital-collection>

TRCS REFERRED TO IN THIS PAPER INCLUDE:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada:

<https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525>

An interactive map of Truth Commissions and related initiatives in the United States: <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/community-resources/trht-map>

Civil society initiatives: https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/ICTJ_Report_Civi-Society-Truth_2.pdf

Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición CEV: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/>

Yoorrook Justice Commission (Australia):

<https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/>

Equity and Reconciliation Commission in Morocco:

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-ouest-saharien-2019-1-page-207.htm>



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