



The Power of We

How collective processes allow healing after mass atrocity – Reflections from the field

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After wars and dictatorships, it is not only the visible scars that remain. How can healing occur where it is most needed, and what are approaches that have worked so far? Our network, the Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation, has decided to engage in reflections on experiences from different countries to promote transformative agendas in contexts of political transitions, social reconciliation and peacebuilding. During 2024, some of the Hub partners – Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), Berghof Foundation, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) and Dejusticia – engaged in the workstream on collective healing. Specifically, they undertook a process of learning and reflecting on experiences around this issue, building on studies and internal reflections by CSV in South Africa and AJAR in the Asia-Pacific region.

We believe that collective healing is a key dimension in addressing the impacts of mass violence and, therefore, should not be disregarded in transitional justice (TJ) and peacebuilding processes. [Rebuilding societies after atrocities means restoring the social fabric and addressing individual and collective mental health and psychosocial needs.](#) This goal cannot be achieved solely through mechanisms for justice, truth and reparation; it also requires dedicated strategies targeting collective goals, such as rebuilding social trust and restoring social ties.

Furthermore, it is essential to include collective healing in TJ and peacebuilding processes, as participants in these mechanisms – both victims and perpetrators – are likely to have psychosocial needs. If not properly addressed in the TJ mechanisms, issues that contribute to violence, such as social distrust and community divisions, may be deepened, fostering the re-emergence of violence. This document compiles the key lessons and challenges from the workstream reflections that may be useful for thinking about collective healing from other regions and how to unlock its transformative potential.

Why a collective approach?

Collective healing shifts the focus from treating individual mental health to rebuilding communities, fostering interpersonal bonds, and restoring trust. Unlike individual-focused approaches, it recognises that trauma is deeply rooted in social and political structures, affecting entire communities

The “**power of we**” lies at the heart of collective healing, emphasising collaboration, mutual support, and shared responsibility in the recovery process.

and not just individuals. By addressing shared experiences of trauma shaped by external forces, collective healing empowers communities to move beyond isolated coping mechanisms toward broader resilience.

Collective healing interventions must incorporate holistic approaches that address the interconnected nature of personal and community trauma and the contextual realities that participants face. In the field, this approach should be implemented by multidisciplinary teams that combine research, advocacy, mental health support, and community engagement.

CSV and AJAR collective healing initiatives: an overview¹

	Stone and Flower	Voice of the Voiceless
Role of the organisation	AJAR designed the strategy and trained local partners to jointly implement the strategy.	CSV designed and implemented the strategy.
Duration	2012 – 2013: initial phase of intervention 2014 – 2015: participatory action research	2012: initial research on the violence against non-nationals 2012: creation of the action group and the capacity-building component of the intervention 2015: second phase of research on the violence against non-nationals 2016: introduction of the psychosocial wellbeing programme 2012 – 2019: project implementation
Beneficiaries	140 women from 12 locations who suffered gender-based violence, including sexual violence, under the military regime in Indonesia and in Myanmar’s civil wars.	Refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants who suffer violence and discrimination from law enforcement in inner-city Johannesburg.

¹ Each initiative has been fully documented by AJAR and CSV in the publications [Stone & Flower: A Guide to Understanding and Action for Women Survivors](#) (2015), Rebello, S. (2021). *Lessons from participants’ experiences of CSV’s psychosocial wellness workshops*. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, and Mfundisi, T. (2014). *Our Journey as the Voice of Voiceless: A case study*. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

What did they want to change and how they did it

Both the *Voice of the Voiceless* and *Stone and Flowers* initiatives aim to help participants achieve a new status where they can advocate for their own rights as well as the rights of their communities. This process involves acknowledging their experiences, fostering individual empowerment, and building a sense of community and solidarity.

Stone and Flower and *Voice of the Voiceless* share some general objectives that align with the nature of collective healing processes.

Collective goals between both initiatives are

- ▶ Preserving collective memory
- ▶ Promoting intergenerational dialogue
- ▶ Restoring social ties
- ▶ Promoting collective resilience
- ▶ Empowering communities
- ▶ Rebuilding social trust
- ▶ Healing collective and individual harm

However, each also has specific objectives with tailored strategies, as illustrated below:

Stone and Flower		
Objective	Strategy	Expected outcomes
Externalising violent experiences and traumas	Storytelling tools to create a safe and trusting environment for sharing traumatic experiences: body mapping, memory boxes, timelines, photographs.	<p>Allowing survivors to speak about their experiences and creating bonds of solidarity among participants to break the silence surrounding the atrocities they faced.</p> <p>Supporting access to justice by combating impunity through making stories of violence and abuse visible and part of a collective experience, rather than isolated cases.</p>
Improving survivors' mental and emotional wellbeing		
Breaking the silence surrounding the atrocities		
Unlearning the acceptance of impunity and transforming victims' coping mechanisms		
Creating an empowering environment for survivors and enabling the advancement of other rights claims.		

Stone and Flowers emphasises the importance of context and setting in creating environments where people's voices are heard and valued. Victims' narratives are seen as a way to empower individuals by validating their experiences and identities. By sharing stories, individuals can connect with others, build a sense of community, and regain their dignity.

Voice of the Voiceless		
Objective	Strategy	Expected outcomes
Promoting solidarity and mutual support among participants	Capacity-building and skill development; psychosocial wellness programme; storytelling and meaning-making; advocacy and rights awareness.	Promoting change on three levels: individual, family and small group; community level; and national level. These aspects translate into individual and collective dimensions of healing and give participants the chance to become agents of change.
Equipping the participants with knowledge and skills to become advocates and champions for marginalised communities		
Improving participants' wellbeing.		

The intervention emphasises community capacity-building and empowerment, which involves equipping participants with knowledge and skills to address trauma and violence collectively. Through workshops and training, community members become change agents as part of the Voice of the Voiceless action group and, in turn, support their communities as leaders and advocates.

Factors for success

The role of research in shaping healing interventions

Research activities enable AJAR and CSVN to better identify participants' needs and engage them in a two-way process with their active involvement.

Incorporating research as part of the intervention cycle is key to:

- ▶ Understanding people's psychosocial support needs,
- ▶ Recognising the depth of traumatic experiences and the overlapping nature of various forms of violence,
- ▶ Designing more accurately tailored interventions, and
- ▶ Raising awareness among a broader audience by shedding light on social issues and analysing how violence and the systematic denial of rights affect individuals and communities.

Community engagement and culturally sensitive interventions

Addressing the collective impacts of violence and working toward collective healing requires communities to take an active role. Their involvement is essential to ensure ownership and the sustainability of these processes. AJAR and CSVR found that achieving a strong level of community engagement is linked to several key success factors:

- ▶ Empowering local leaders.
- ▶ Adopting culturally sensitive interventions, such as incorporating traditional practices, and
- ▶ Including community members as facilitators in the processes, who will maintain the cycles of learning and bridge local efforts with broader advocacy initiatives.
- ▶ Involving younger community members in the process through intergenerational dialogue, aiming to extend the demands for truth and justice beyond the direct victims, who may not see their struggles bearing fruit.

Safe spaces for sharing and fostering solidarity

Sharing experiences of violence can be both cathartic and triggering. While acknowledging the pain that comes from revisiting traumatic experiences is a crucial part of the process, certain conditions must be met to facilitate healing and transformation. Addressing the sensitivity involved in discussing traumatic experiences requires:

- ▶ A safe and respectful environment where victims/survivors do not feel judged or threatened.
- ▶ Ongoing support to address triggering situations as they arise.
- ▶ Diverse methodologies that allow individuals to externalise their experiences in a non-aggressive and non-intrusive manner.

Support in capacity-building, empowerment, advocacy

Combining psychosocial support with complementary capacity-building, empowerment and advocacy enhances the impact of initiatives. It raises awareness about rights and available resources, empowering participants to advocate for themselves and others. Providing advocacy tools strengthens participants' ownership of the process and their role as agents of change. Key elements include:

- ▶ Conducting capacity-building efforts to equip participants with knowledge and tools to promote the psychosocial wellbeing of other community members.
- ▶ Adopting flexible methodologies that can be adapted and replicated in various contexts.
- ▶ Providing training for community members, enabling them to replicate the tools in other settings without relying on AJAR or CSV.
- ▶ Empowering communities to understand the implications of the violence they endured (e.g. through training on human rights abuses and typologies) as a foundational step towards initiating advocacy efforts for truth, justice and reparation.

Main challenges

The challenges present in both experiences highlight the need for comprehensive interventions involving various partners – state agencies or other stakeholders – and specialised mental health care for individuals with more complex challenges. While there are positive aspects and lessons that can inspire other initiatives, ensuring the success and sustainability of these interventions is something that a single organisation in a challenging context is unlikely to be able to accomplish on its own.

Challenges:

Complex trauma profiles

In contexts of systemic violence, multiple layers often overlap. For example, direct acts of violence may intersect with discrimination, exclusion, or the deprivation of basic goods and services.

Sustainability of engagement

Ensuring continuous participation and engagement from community members may be difficult due to factors such as economic instability and personal circumstances.

Triggers and retraumatisation

Participants might face difficulties in managing their psychosocial wellbeing while taking part in the activities or supporting others. Similarly, due to social taboos, externalising the violence they experienced might lead to fears of exclusion, particularly in cases of sexual violence.

Persistence of systemic violence

Facing systemic violence (e.g. discrimination, social and economic exclusion) hinders the success of processes and may exacerbate pre-existing traumas.

Addressing the complex interplay of trauma, economic instability and social stigma requires a holistic approach that engages communities actively and continuously. Healing is not a linear journey but rather a communal process that benefits from ongoing collaboration, resource allocation, and a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by those involved. It is imperative that future efforts not only focus on immediate interventions but also consider long-term strategies that promote healing, empowerment, and resilience in the face of adversity.

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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