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## A Catalyst for Change

### Engaging Youth in Transitional Justice

Transitional justice efforts aim to catalyze longer-term processes of social and political change that challenge impunity, address the legacies of past abuses, and advance acknowledgment, dignity, and respect for rights. Although youth are key political and social stakeholders who have much to contribute to—and gain from—transitional justice processes, they often remain marginalized from such processes or are given only a limited and predetermined space in which to engage.

In recent years, the peacebuilding field, in reflecting on what it means to meaningfully engage youth, has advanced a more nuanced framework that focuses on youth as agents of change. This positive development was further bolstered at the international policy level by the unanimous adoption in December 2015 of Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security. This resolution addresses how to meaningfully engage youth in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and transitional justice work by calling for them to be actively engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> The Secretary-General welcomed the resolution, noting that it “marks a shift in the way the world seeks to prevent and end violence by acknowledging the positive and constructive roles that youth play in building sustainable peace and preserving international security.”<sup>2</sup>

Transitional justice practitioners must shift their thinking as well and develop a more deliberate approach to working with youth and consider them a central component of transitional justice, not a side topic or an afterthought. By reflecting on ICTJ’s work with youth over the past several years, this briefing seeks to advance guiding principles and approaches for meaningfully engaging youth in transitional justice processes.

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#### Unique Role and Potential of Youth

Historically, and across disparate contexts, youth have played a significant role in driving social, political, and institutional change. From the anti-apartheid movement, to the range of powerful student movements in South America, to the civil rights movement in the United States, to the more recent Arab Spring, organized youth groups

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<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 2250, 7573rd meeting, December 9, 2015 (SC/12149).

<sup>2</sup> *United Nations*, “UN Security Council Adopts Historic Resolution on Youth, Peace and Security,” Press Release, December 9, 2015.

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and grassroots networks have challenged injustice, demanded accountability, and advanced a vision for a just and peaceful future.<sup>3</sup>

In South Africa, youth activism has been credited as the “backbone” of the anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>4</sup> The voting age was even lowered from 18 to 14 for the 1994 election in response to the key role played by youth in the struggle.<sup>5</sup> In Tunisia, youth brought about the revolution by building a broad coalition of social and political forces against Ben Ali's regime. Feeling the brunt of massive unemployment, unequal regional development, and political repression, Tunisian youth led a movement that tapped into shared grievances and provided a catalyst for the collapse of the regime.<sup>6</sup>

Youth are neither a homogenous group nor a category that should be idealized or vilified. However, they share certain attributes because of their particular phase in life, between childhood and adulthood, dependence and independence, which often grants them a unique perspective that is invaluable for effectively addressing legacies of past abuse and advancing a more just and inclusive society. While the UN defines youth as those ages 15 to 24, in practice, this age range is fluid—the specific economic and sociocultural context, rather than age alone, defines youth.<sup>7</sup> Given their liminal state, youth generally are more future oriented, demonstrate openness to change and innovation, and are more willing to take risks.<sup>8</sup> Among displaced Syrian youth in Lebanon, for example, many report having learned new skills and becoming more tolerant and open by engaging with civil society in Lebanon, despite the difficult conditions.<sup>9</sup> Youth often have the energy, commitment, and idealism necessary to challenge unjust systems and structures and to envision more just alternatives.<sup>10</sup> In many contexts, youth are politically significant “as smaller-scale socio-cultural and ideological entrepreneurs bringing knowledge, perspectives, and hidden politics to the surface.”<sup>11</sup> Youth movements have mastered the use of new media and internet platforms to amplify stories that advance social and revolutionary aims.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to their ability to initiate social debates, youth make up a significant proportion of the population and are the next generation of political and institutional

**3** “During the U.S. Civil Rights movement, Claudette Colvin was just 15 when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white person (nine months before Rosa Parks). Young Civil Rights activists like Diane Nash developed new tactics like the Freedom Rides and built powerful movement organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee . . . [Y]oung people have been important participants in movements to topple dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, protest austerity measures and corruption in Greece and Spain, and defend public education in Canada and Chile.” Sasha Costanza-Chock, “Youth and Social Movements: Key Lessons for Allies,” *The Kinder and Braver World Project: Research Series* (2012), 2.

**4** Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, Kroc Institute, “Youth as Social and Political Agents: Issues in Post-Settlement Peace Building,” *Occasional Paper 21:OP:2* (2001), 13.

**5** *Ibid.*

**6** Alcinda Honwana, “Youth and the Tunisian Transition,” *Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum Policy Paper* (2011), 1.

**7** See UN Youth, “Definition of Youth,” website: [www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf). However, the age range is flexible; see, Yvonne Kemper, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, “Youth in War-to-Peace Transitions: Approaches of International Organizations,” *Berghof Report 10* (2005).

**8** Celina Del Felice and Andria Wisler, “The Unexplored Power and Potential of Youth as Peace-builders,” *Journal of Peace Conflict and Development* 11 (November 2007).

**9** Rim El Gantri and Karim El Mufti, ICTJ, “Not Without Dignity: Views of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon on Displacement, Conditions of Return, and Coexistence” (2017), 23–24.

**10** See, for example, Del Felice and Wisler, “The Unexplored Power and Potential of Youth as Peace-Builders.”

**11** Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, “Youth,” in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, ed. Roger MacGinty (New York: Routledge, 2013), 304.

**12** Costanza-Chock, “Youth and Social Movements,” 1.

leaders. They are a key constituency responsible for consolidating the new political order, building democratic values, and sustaining peace. Drawing on reflections from the peacebuilding field, Siobhán McEvoy-Levy says that a lasting peace will depend “on whether the next generations accept or reject it, how they are socialized during the peace process and their perception of what that peace has achieved.”<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Schwartz explains that if young people are given spaces to have their voices heard



*Titled “Last Round,” this photo by Sami Ouchane took second prize in a 2015 photography contest organized by ICTJ in Lebanon for youth born after 1990 on the topic of the Lebanese civil war and its legacy (ICTJ).*

and a chance to participate in the peace process, “they may be more inclined to trust in the peace process and strive to further it when they become leaders. But if youth needs are ignored, disenchantment with the peace process will affect how these young people interact with state institutions and deal with community issues in the future.”<sup>14</sup>

As transmitters of memory, youth play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of violations. Those who were born after the period of repression or human rights violations in a specific country may not have all the information about these past violations but may experience their enduring legacies in the present. Having a clearer sense of how the past shapes the present is a crucial first step in deciding how to mobilize people and push for change.<sup>15</sup> In Canada, for example, interviews with students revealed that many did not know about or understand the full extent or impact of Indian Residential Schools (IRS), a government policy that sought to “kill the Indian in the child” by forcibly removing indigenous children from their families and placing them in

<sup>13</sup> McEvoy-Levy, “Youth as Social and Political Agents,” 5.

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Schwartz, *Youth and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>15</sup> “We can’t construct a national identity without a national truth,” said a Kenyan youth leader during an ICTJ workshop in Nairobi in July 2015. Another Kenyan youth leader at the workshop stated: “Knowledge is power. If the youth are aware, there is hope for a better future, a better Kenya, a better Africa, a better world.”

government-funded, church-run schools.<sup>16</sup> Reflecting on violations against indigenous people in Canada, Emily, a high school student in Edmonton, Canada, stated: “It’s a cycle, and if we don’t stop the cycle it will just keep going. Youth are the basis for the future. It is important for us to know now, so we can find a solution to it.” In many contexts youth appreciate the importance of education as a conduit for change and understand its potential to either reinforce a system of oppression or to lay the foundation for an engaged citizenry that thinks critically about mistakes of the past.<sup>17</sup>

As youth continue to absorb the shocks of rising inequality, they will likely continue to organize against the power hierarchies that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Given young people’s potential to imagine the changes needed for a better future, and their current role as a significant constituency of voters, educators, and key influencers, it is particularly important for them to be part of processes that engage with and draw lessons from a difficult past. As a key part of civil society, youth “can enforce ‘a renegotiation of the social contract’ and thus become a cornerstone for societal transformation.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout its work, ICTJ have seen engagement in transitional justice efforts inspire a sense of activism and responsibility among young people, leading them to advocate for accountability and reform and preparing them to effectively contribute toward the (re)building of a society committed to respect for human rights and sustainable peace. In many cases their contributions help push the boundaries of the field, challenge the status quo, and bring to the surface pressing issues that need to be addressed to make a real break from the past as the basis for a better present and future.

### Exclusion of Youth from Transitional Justice Processes

Despite the roles youth play in driving political and social change, they often do not have a seat at the table during political transitions, including within transitional justice efforts. Rather, these deliberations are often led by political elites and institutions. In many cases, the same young people who led the demand for change are later marginalized from the negotiations about addressing and preventing the injustice of the past and present. All too often, their potential and activism are recognized when it is time to fight or oust a regime but not when it is time to rebuild the state. National and international policymakers involved in the conceptualization and implementation of transitional justice initiatives have largely failed to genuinely consider youth as important stakeholders in efforts to establish peace and institute long-term progressive reform. As a result, this key force of social and political change has often remained disengaged from and uninvested in transitional justice efforts.

The case of South Africa is illustrative. Young people were central to the anti-apartheid struggle, yet once negotiations began, older leaders returning from exile and prison asked them to return to what they deemed more age-appropriate activities. This was in part out of concern for their education, but as a result, youth felt cheated

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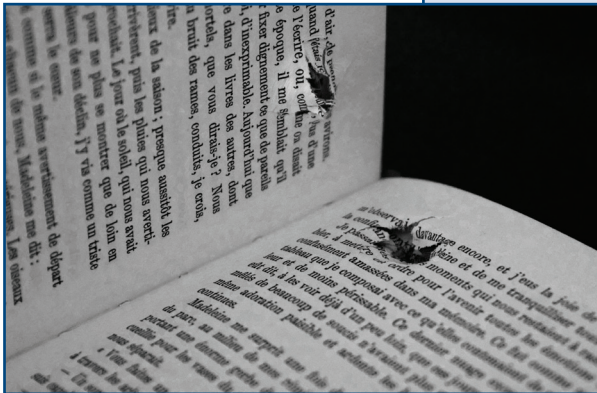
<sup>16</sup> The IRS amounted to cultural genocide and were characterized by rampant neglect and physical and sexual abuse.

<sup>17</sup> For a more complete discussion on education in relation to transitional justice, see Clara Ramírez-Barat and Roger Duthie, eds., *Transitional Justice and Education: Learning Peace* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Yvonne Kemper, *Youth in War-to-Peace Transitions: Approaches of International Organizations* (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2005), 38.

### LEBANON: Knowledge Is Key to Breaking the Cycle of Violations

The generation born after 1990 in Lebanon lacks basic information about the country’s civil war. It is a taboo topic and not part of the school curricula. In 2015, ICTJ organized a photo contest that asked Lebanese young people, aged 15 to 25, to use their cameras to explore their understanding of the war and how it continues to shape the country and people’s lives.



The contest’s grand-prize winner was a black-and-white photo (left) of an open book pierced by a single bullet hole, taken by Sibylle George, a 22-year-old architecture student from American University of Beirut. She recounted: “My grandmother’s house is full of objects that have witnessed atrocities committed since 1975, among them, books. This book, titled *Dominique*, was only shot once. It’s been lying on the bookshelf in the living room since that day, but no one had dared to open it.”

The five winning photographs and 21 other entries formed part of a photo exhibit that traveled the country, bringing young people from diverse backgrounds and sects together to learn about the civil war and share their perspectives. The discussions revealed that without a clear understanding of the past, many youth join political parties based solely on family or sectarian ties (UNDP, “Education and Citizenship: Concepts, Attitude, Skills and Actions,” 2008, 37). In many cases youth repeated stories they had heard, without realizing they are politicized and built around an “us versus them” dichotomy that continues to divide people and groups across Lebanon. A participant from Keserwan notes, “As a Lebanese, I should know the history of my country, in order to learn from what happened and from the mistakes of others”(ICTJ, *The War As I See It*,” 2017, 5). Without an appreciation of the country’s recent history and the causes and consequences of intercommunal strife, the postwar generation is left vulnerable to political manipulation and radicalism.

Given a chance to explore this recent past, most young people consulted were unanimous in their desire to learn more about it, calling for it to be taught in schools. They want to replicate this project through which they were encouraged to think more critically about the past and how to address its consequences in the present. As one participant from Byblos wrote, “I feel more empowered after this event and feel that we can do something to make social change”( ICTJ, “The War As I See It,” 2017, 9).

Photo: Sibylle George won grand prize for this photo in ICTJ’s youth photography contest in Lebanon (ICTJ).

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“[In Tunisia] the political attitude towards youth has not changed. They saw youth as an electoral reservoir, as objects not subjects.”

— Charfeddine El Kellil, *Tunisian Human Rights Lawyer and Member of the “I Will Not Forgive” Youth-Led Coalition*

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out of decision-making power.<sup>19</sup> The development of criminal gangs, which poses significant challenges to the post-apartheid government, has been attributed to the marginalization of youth during the transition.<sup>20</sup> If youth are sidelined from transitional justice processes, they are likely to feel robbed of their ability to bring about change and resentful of the new order, which may lead them to disengage. That in turn is a lost opportunity for the country and society.

More recently in Tunisia, the same young people who drove the revolution have been struggling to have a role in constructing the new social and political order and the mechanisms to address past injustice. Reflecting on the process in Tunisia, Rim el Gantri notes that “despite the fact that we were showing ourselves as a country favoring youth—this was the message we were giving to the international community, that youth were the pillar of the country—in fact, it was not true.” She says, “Youth were used during elections to create an image, but they didn’t benefit from their ‘rights,’ especially not in marginalized regions.”<sup>21</sup> Despite the crucial role youth played in leading the revolution, the transitional justice process did not open significant channels for them to engage in the process. As one young activist reflected, “The problem is that in Tunisia, the Truth and Dignity Commission has become an institution, and we have a specific relationship with institutions. They forget it’s a revolution.”<sup>22</sup>

As the examples above highlight, to date, youth have largely been marginalized from transitional justice initiatives. However, that is slowly changing. Sierra Leone blazed the trail with its explicit focus on children and youth in the truth commission process, and with the “Accountability Now” clubs set up by the Special Court for Sierra Leone to involve youth in educating their peers and communities about human rights.<sup>23</sup> More recently, in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did not initially have an explicit focus on youth. However, at the first national event the commissioners were impressed by the participation of a group of youth and their testimonies reflecting the severity and magnitude of the intergenerational impact of the residential schools. In response, the TRC created “Education Day,” to be included at each of the remaining national events. Several hundred students attended each of the Education Days to witness cultural ceremonies, listen to survivors’ testimonies, and view an exhibit about the history and impact of the Indian Residential Schools (IRS). This initiative was complemented by a teaching unit about the IRS.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the TRC in Canada listened to young voices, recognized a gap in its process, and added a new and unique element to its truth-seeking efforts.

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**19** McEvoy-Levy, “Youth as Social and Political Agents,” 10; Gill Straker, *Faces in Revolution: The Psychological Effects of Violence* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992).

**20** McEvoy-Levy, “Youth as Social and Political Agents,” 10.

**21** Kate McCabe, ICTJ, “Dreams of January” (2015).

**22** Interview by the author, January 2017.

**23** Clara Ramírez-Barat, ICTJ, “Engaging Children and Youth in Transitional Justice Processes: Guidance for Outreach Programs” (November 2012), 14.

**24** See The Legacy of Hope website: [www.legacyofhope.ca/home](http://www.legacyofhope.ca/home). The curriculum can be found on the Where are the Children? website: [wherearethekids.ca/en](http://wherearethekids.ca/en).

Despite these positive initiatives, dominant approaches to working with youth are still too often based on “a belief that youth need to be guided, shaped, pacified, or controlled.”<sup>25</sup> The limited body of knowledge around the engagement of young people that exists has largely been developed through the lens of capacity building and technical assistance with an emphasis on developing procedures to allow young people to fit their voices into a predetermined process. Not enough attention has been given to developing opportunities for young people to offer their perspectives to help shape and influence the response to mass atrocities and ending impunity. From the perspective of transitional justice goals—specifically the goal of catalyzing a process of social and political reform—a more elicitive approach is needed, in which the people who experienced the violations and who are living with their enduring impacts, including adolescents and youth, offer guidance on and shape transitional justice approaches.

### Guiding Principles and Programmatic Approaches to Engage Youth

A number of guiding principles on and programmatic approaches to engaging youth in transitional justice efforts can be drawn from ICTJ’s work with young people in various contexts including Canada, Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire, Colombia, Uganda, and Tunisia.

Respect is the fundamental principle underpinning an effective approach to engaging youth in transitional justice processes. This respect comes from an appreciation of youth’s role in pushing for social and political change and is rooted in an understanding of young people as citizens and key connectors in society.<sup>26</sup> Respect thus entails a recognition of young people’s agency and of their lived reality. It also calls on practitioners to refrain from taking a patronizing approach.

In Colombia’s reintegration program for former child soldiers, for example, several young men and women who entered the program as adolescents were resentful of the strict curfews and limitations imposed upon them. It is neither respectful nor realistic to pretend these 16-, 17-, or 18-year-olds are naive children, even if legally they are considered minors. It is not possible to erase the adult experiences to which they were subjected. Rather, it is necessary to consult with those affected to understand their experiences, their aspirations, and what can help them move forward, which may not always be what one expects. For example, Maria, a former child soldier in Colombia, was frustrated when she was offered training only in baking and cobblery, when what she really wanted was support to pursue a university degree in political science. “Many of us possess vast experience in the areas of survival, health, and discipline that we gained during our time in the armed groups. But it’s not appreciated . . . [The reintegration program] does not help us to achieve our dreams and to achieve a higher purpose.”<sup>27</sup> Defying stereotypes of a traumatized child with limited capacity, young survivors often have ideas on ways to build on what they learned from these extremely difficult yet formative experiences to forge their future.

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**25** Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, “Children, Youth, and Peacebuilding,” in *Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*, Thomas Matyók et al., eds. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 168. For additional discussion, see also Schwartz, *Youth and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, and Kemper, *Youth in War-to-Peace Transitions*.

**26** McEvoy-Levy, “Children, Youth, and Peacebuilding,” 173.

**27** Cristián Correa et al., ICTJ, “Reparación integradora para niños, niñas y jóvenes víctimas de reclutamiento ilícito en Colombia” (October 2014).

### Côte d’Ivoire: Youth-Led Efforts Challenge Dominant Narratives and Foster Civic Engagement

Youth voices can serve as an important corrective narrative to the accepted ones of a conflict. In Côte d’Ivoire, ICTJ in partnership with UNICEF supported a group of youth leaders to create a radio program based on the testimonies and dialogues they had documented across the country. The program chronicled a very different history from the one told in official circles. It set aside the notion that youth violence was a form of mass hysteria, and instead suggested that the Ivorian conflict was the boiling point in a longstanding intergenerational conflict.



In creating their own truth-seeking process in the form of a radio program, these youth took responsibility for their past and, even more importantly, for their future. As commentator Amandine, 22, remarks: “Actors we have been. Perpetrators, too, in the recent history of Côte d’Ivoire. But what type of actors will we be? What role do we want to play in the future of our beautiful nation, our beautiful country? What do we need to do to avoid the return of massive human rights violations and the unnecessary suffering of the population?”

Out of this process and in response to these questions, the young people decided to focus on “politique positive,” a term they coined to encourage their peers to become active, engaged citizens through nonviolent means and to refuse the call to violent mobilization. A year later the youth formed their own official independent association, the Réseau Action Justice et Paix. Founded in 2014, it remains active to this day.

Most recently they traveled across the country with ICTJ, to gather perspectives from child and youth victims on the consequences of the violations they suffered and their suggestions for reparations. Their key recommendations were shared with the National Commission for Reconciliation and Compensation of Victims, the government body charged with developing a reparations policy, and were included in the reparations policy, which is now with the president awaiting implementation.

This project thus catalyzed the engagement of youth leaders and the creation of a new youth organization that continues to challenge impunity and advocate for the recognition of young people’s rights.

*Photo: An Ivorian youth activist conducts an interview as part of an ICTJ-supported radio project (ICTJ).*

As youth transition from childhood to adulthood, they gain civic rights and responsibilities. They are able to vote for the first time or experience the power of voting with their bodies and voices through protests and social movements. In contexts where transitional justice processes are underway, efforts to engage youth should focus on supporting their political agency and fostering their civic engagement.



To that end, policymakers and practitioners should engage with youth as citizens, as the important political and social constituency they are, not in a top-down patronizing or exploitative way. This involves approaching youth in a mutual exchange of information and a two-way learning process.

### Identify the Right Partners

In working with youth, practitioners need to invest the time and resources to identify the right partners. A focus on youth should not lead to the creation of a box to check off or a quota to fill. Rather practitioners should look to active social forces already more broadly engaged in issues related to the objectives of transitional justice.<sup>28</sup> When seeking to engage youth in a specific context, it is important to look beyond formalized organizations or networks that define themselves around the concept of youth, rather than around an ideology or mission. In some cases, formalized youth groups have been depoliticized and coopted by government or other institutions to fulfill a circumscribed and predetermined role. Identifying young people who are or want to be actively engaged in the country's change process—whether it be social, political, or economic—requires targeted and strategic efforts, starting with a rigorous analysis of stakeholders and influencers in diverse spheres.

For instance, many youth-led social movements have horizontal structures that develop organically in response to specific grievances or problems in their country and society. They do not necessarily have a central office, paid staff, or a dedicated communications team. This informal structure can pose a challenge for institutions and organizations that are used to engaging with interlocutors through formal channels. A horizontal youth movement cannot be engaged in the same way one would engage a local human rights organization or a government ministry.

A more creative and sensitive approach is required to identify and engage youth organizations. In Kenya for example, ICTJ found partners for its work by going to a collective of young socially conscious artists at an organization and art space called "PAWA 254." Using art as a starting point, PAWA's work focuses on shaping Kenya's socioeconomic and political landscape by supporting the growth of "highly skilled *artists* and the movement of active, freethinking youth."<sup>29</sup> At a time when the political elite in Kenya wanted to bury the final report of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) of Kenya, these youth activists were calling for an even deeper examination of past violations and the need to challenge the systems that allow them to continue.

ICTJ thus worked with PAWA to host an educational workshop on the final report of the TJRC. Held on their premises, youth members took part in the workshop and also helped record and document it. That collaboration helped ICTJ find youth partners (both from PAWA and from other affiliated organizations) and also contributed to PAWA (i.e., paying for the use of their space and hiring their photographers and videographers, rather than convening the workshop at a hotel and hiring an external company). In many cases youth are unpaid activists or volunteers and, therefore, do not have

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<sup>28</sup> "[D]espite their relative invisibility they exist organically and need to be supported and fostered rather than created anew. . . Rather than seeking for youth that campaign for peace, one might look to those who are involved in social development, capacity building, and political education for youth members of political groups" (McEvoy-Levy, "Children, Youth, and Peacebuilding," 25).

<sup>29</sup> See the PAWA 254 website: [pawa254.org](http://pawa254.org).

the same luxury of time or resources to support their work. Awareness and sensitivity to that are key to developing effective strategies and partnerships.<sup>30</sup>



*Photo: Young people, including a young man (center) wearing a T-shirt with the Maneesh M'sameh logo, protest against rising prices and tax increases in Tunis, Tunisia, on January 13, 2018 (Reuters).*

In some contexts, a few brilliant youth activists are able to gain access to national and international forums to advocate for critical issues facing children and youth. These highly influential youth leaders are crucial to helping raise awareness about specific issues—for example, the plight of child soldiers or young girls who seek an education. As practitioners, it is important to listen to and work with these leaders. However, bearing in mind that youth have different priorities and interests that are likely not represented in the mainstream debates, we should not limit ourselves to working only with the most prominent voices; we must make an effort to reach out to a diverse cross section of young people in order to have a more inclusive approach.

### **Develop Meaningful Two-Way Partnerships**

Policymakers and practitioners should not look to what they can do for youth but rather, together with youth and other key stakeholders, explore how to jointly shape a strategy and push a process forward. In other words, it is important to develop programming with youth, not for or targeted at youth. That involves asking questions and genuinely listening to young people's perceptions of the past and present, as well as their critiques of the current approach to transitional justice issues such as fighting impunity. If we commit to listening, we can learn a lot about a process's blind spots by speaking with youth about where the process is falling short of their expectations.

<sup>30</sup> While this is true for many activists, in the case of youth, particular attention should be paid to not derailing their education and career through participation in programmatic work around transitional justice. Rather, that work should respect the time and space they need to dedicate to education and work and provide an additional opportunity to enhance their prospects in those spheres.

Those critiques can provide useful insights on how to adapt transitional justice approaches to be more effective in a specific context.

For young people in Tunisia, corruption and economic justice are the central issues to be addressed as part of the revolution—as opposed to civil and political rights which have traditionally characterized transitional justice processes. Youth are thus pushing the boundaries of transitional justice, calling for structural change to prevent ongoing corruption. The mandate of the Truth and Dignity Commission to pursue accountability for corruption and economic crimes partially reflects this focus on corruption, but it does not address economic policy, and the state’s efforts to guarantee impunity for corrupt officials has undermined it.

In October 2015, Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi first introduced a draft law on “economic reconciliation.” Far from promoting reconciliation, the law grants amnesty to public officials who were involved in corruption during the dictatorship but who claim they did not personally gain from it. Many activists expressed anger at the bill and started a Google group call Maneesh M’sameh (“I Will Not Forgive” in English) to block it. As Hamza Abidi, one of the youth organizers, explained, “Maneesh M’sameh worked to unite all of the political factions but also to attract wide participation of young people, especially those who either have not been involved in politics or do not have clear political affiliations.”<sup>31</sup>

After massive demonstrations, the “Administrative Reconciliation” law did not pass. Determined to get it through, the president presented a slightly revised bill, but Maneesh M’sameh pushed back, again, and was able to block it a second time. “Before the January 14, 2011, revolution, resistance to Ben Ali’s regime was united—the opposition split only after he fell. Maneesh M’sameh . . . was the first organized effort to reunite the opposition since 2011,” explains Wassim Sghayr, the coordinator of Maneesh M’sameh.<sup>32</sup>

The law finally did pass on September 15, 2017, but not without significant modifications. Although the final provisions of the law remain problematic from an accountability standpoint, Maneesh M’sameh succeeded in pushing legislators to water down the bill and remove amnesty for businessmen and those who committed financial crimes.

When asked about transitional justice in Tunisia in 2017, another youth member of Maneesh M’sameh explained: “We’re very skeptical about transitional justice because it doesn’t want to change things in Tunisia.” The passing of the law granting amnesty to corrupt government officials is a step back for accountability and a challenging moment for Tunisia’s transition. It calls on practitioners to look outside the formalized institutions and look to social movements, including those led by youth, to build on their successes and see how to make this process one of political, economic, and social change owned and driven by Tunisian citizens, not coopted by elites.

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<sup>31</sup> Laryssa Chomiak and Lana Salman, “Refusing to Forgive: Tunisia’s Maneesh M’sameh Campaign,” *MER* 287, 46 (Winter 2016).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

### Open and Protect Spaces for Youth-Led Action

A tension often exists between the perspectives of youth and what the elite or power holders see as best for their country. A key programmatic consideration for international policymakers and transitional justice practitioners should be a commitment to support more representative demands for reform, including those expressed by young people.

Effective youth engagement is often not in the interest of current power holders, but it is in the interest of the wider citizenry and society. The needs of youth are generally less about protection and more related to social, economic, and political empowerment, which could be deemed politically dangerous.<sup>33</sup> Creating spaces for young people to exercise political agency could be destabilizing for the political elites managing the transition and a threat to the status quo. “When young people refrain from action, political elites have an easy time staying in power,” explain Kurtenbach and Pawelz.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to not underestimate the structural and power asymmetries that exist between youth and established political parties or organizations.<sup>35</sup> It is easy to say young people are agents of change, putting that burden on them but not sufficiently supporting them to create that change. For example, in Egypt and Tunisia, where youth led the revolutions, they were effective in challenging a common enemy, which had a unifying effect. However, different visions for the future of their countries put the more organic youth movements at a disadvantage compared with the well-established political parties, as they both seek to shape their country’s future.<sup>36</sup> The young people “who initiated the revolution are not politically organized . . . [O]ld and newly established political forces, many of which do not represent the interests of the youth, are now occupying the void created by Ben Ali’s departure.”<sup>37</sup> While it may have been politically expedient for members of the opposition groups to rally behind the youth movement to overthrow Mubarak or Ben Ali, once power was up for grabs, “the more established parties have the leadership and experienced political machinery to co-opt the process of state-building for their own goals.”<sup>38</sup> According to ICTJ’s Salwa El Gantri, “Tunisia prefers traditional leadership with adult leaders.”<sup>39</sup> External actors also have a much easier time engaging with formal actors, whether from political or academic institutions or established organizations.

This is where international intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations have a role to play to protect space for youth action. As practitioners committed to supporting youth engagement, these external actors should use their influence to help open and keep open the space for youth to act. It is necessary to be aware of power discrepancies between these established organizations and youth activists and

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**33** Jason Hart, “Beyond Struggle and Aid: Children’s Identities in a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Jordan,” in *Children and Youth on the Front Line: Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement*, eds. J. Boyden and J de Berry (Berghahn Books, 2004), 167–188.

**34** Sabine Kurtenbach and Janina Pawelz, “Voting Is Not Enough: Youth and Political Citizenship in Post-War Societies,” *Peacebuilding* 3, 2 (2015): 142–143.

**35** McEvoy-Levy, “Children, Youth, and Peacebuilding,” 169.

**36** Stephanie Schwartz, United States Institute of Peace, “Youth and the ‘Arab Spring’” (2011).

**37** Honwana, “Youth and the Tunisian Transition,” 1.

**38** Schwartz, “Youth and the ‘Arab Spring.’”

**39** Rachel Goodman, ICTJ, interview with Salwa El Gantri, (April 2016).

### Canada: Youth-Led Truth-Seeking Reveals Intergenerational Trauma and Leads to Curricular Reform

In October 2010 and November 2011, ICTJ partnered with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada to host youth retreats with small groups of high school students. Participants learned about the truth commission process in Canada, as well as the details of an Indian Residential School survivor’s experiences. The goal of these retreats was to build capacity among young people in Canada to engage on issues related to the Indian Residential School system and to facilitate increased youth participation in the TRC.



Two of the participants produced a video, “Our Truth,” which was presented at the TRC’s National Event in Inuvik in June 2011. Molly Tilden and Marlisa Brown (pictured left) interviewed their high school peers about what they knew about the Indian Residential Schools, whether they thought these schools had any impact today, and whether they thought they contributed to racism. Captured on film, the answers were shocking: Some students—largely the nonaboriginal youth—had no knowledge of the schools or simply displayed complete indifference. Other students spoke about the enduring impact they saw in terms of high rates of alcoholism, suicide, and teenage pregnancies. There was a huge disconnect between how young people viewed the relevance of this legacy and what knowledge they had of it.

The reaction by both survivors and the media was strong and overwhelmingly positive. The video presented a frank view of young people’s attitudes toward survivors of the residential schools, highlighting the racism endemic in their community. Their words were not softened through diplomatic editing, and the bluntness of the prejudice exhibited in the video was critical to its impact. In the spring of 2012, education experts lobbying the governments of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut included this video as part of their proposed revised curriculum on Indian Residential Schools. According to a curricular development consultant who participated in these meetings, the revised curriculum was likely approved in part because of the documentary. The prejudiced views blithely stated by interviewees in the film embarrassed parents and school officials, prompting support for educational reform.

*Photo: Molly Tilden and Marlisa Brown present their film at the TRC’s event in Inuvik in 2011 (ICTJ).*

between youth and political parties and consciously seek to help offset that imbalance by leveraging resources and power to help open platforms, amplify voices, and make connections between youth and those in power. As a young Lebanese who took part in ICTJ’s photo exhibit “The War as I See It” reflected: “Raising young people’s awareness about the civil war frightens political leaders.”<sup>40</sup> But if practitioners of transitional justice are committed to facilitating processes that can help catalyze long-

<sup>40</sup> ICTJ, “The War As I See It” (2017), 3.

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“We are the next generation; after 10 years we are going to be the adults, the lawyers, the prime ministers. We have to know when we are young, and when we are older, we can make sure this doesn’t happen.”

— *Andrea, High School Student from  
Edmonton, Canada*

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term change, they need to find ways to overcome resistance from elites and help open spaces to challenge the status quo and imagine a future based on dignity and respect.

On the ground, practitioners have different ways of implementing this idea, depending on the specific context and issue. For example, if in a specific country young people have concerns or demands they would like to present to political leaders but cannot get a meeting with them, practitioners from established institutions with access to high-level officials can invite politicians and youth leaders to a meeting in which the youth can directly address political leaders. In other contexts, facilitating a bilateral meeting or amplifying youth demands through more formal channels of communication may be more effective. In Uganda, for example, ICTJ hosted a film screening of a documentary it produced with its partners in Northern Uganda, highlighting the need for reparative justice of formerly abducted young mothers and their children born of wartime

sexual violence. As these women and their children did not have access to high-level government officials, ICTJ invited them to a workshop where they were able to speak directly with such officials about the challenges they were facing and their civic demands from the state. ICTJ continues to work with these partners to help them find their political voice and demand respect for their rights, leveraging its contacts to ensure that those who need to hear their messages are present.

As an example of another programmatic approach, in hosting a conference it is easier to go through formalized channels to invite people’s reflections on a specific context or issue. It is much harder to invite someone from a more organic and horizontal youth-led movement. Practitioners should therefore invest time and resources to look beyond usual suspects and invite a variety of voices and perspectives. In some cases, these invitees may not be used to traveling, especially not inter-

nationally, so practitioners must make specific provisions, such as providing support for passport or visa applications, advancing money to cover pre-trip expenses (assuming they cannot front those costs and get reimbursed later), and providing assistance throughout any complications. The details will differ depending on the context, but the underlying principle is to analyze power dynamics and seek to leverage power differentials effectively to help young people exercise their political agency.

### **Focus on Process Not Only Outcomes**

Finally, a focus on process is perhaps the most important programmatic approach to keep in mind when engaging youth in transitional justice or related work. To accomplish the goal of fostering civic engagement, programmers and policymakers need to be very deliberate in thinking about and establishing the processes for their work. An elicitive, process-focused approach calls on practitioners to provide the space, resources, and scaffolding but leaves the final outcome blank, to be co-created and filled in by the youth themselves.

This process poses a challenge for organizations that receive funding from donors, who require detailed lists of activities and outcomes in a rigid logical framework where the results are already anticipated. Program designers need to find a way to make very clear the guiding objectives of their work, the process they will use to help advance the objectives, and the key interlocutors. However, participants themselves should determine the final outcome or product. On the donor side, it is important for donors to shift their

requirements to open space for a more process-oriented approach. Ideally, donors would ask grantees for more justification for their objectives and their strategies and plans on how to achieve them, rather than for the expected outcomes, unless the outcomes are framed around the types of processes or conversations that the program would generate. To this end, it would be helpful for donors to develop indicators that measure the co-creation of projects and ideas. Doing so would place more value on the program's ability to adapt to new insights and respond to emerging challenges.

In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, ICTJ benefitted from flexible funding that allowed it to adapt and change in response to new contextual challenges and to new ideas generated by the youth leaders themselves. ICTJ, in partnership with UNICEF, had initially planned to support youth engagement in the formal truth commission. However, when the official truth commission stalled for several months, the ICTJ-UNICEF team was forced to rethink its programmatic goals. That shift led the team to a much more process-focused project with very positive results.

Rather than pausing along with the stalled truth commission, the team turned to youth leaders outside the formal education sector to take the project in a more innovative direction. ICTJ provided the general framework, some basic information, and seed money. The youth then determined what they wanted to do, including the specific content and format. They held their own dialogues in forums of their own choosing and gathered their peers' perspectives on the violent past in Côte d'Ivoire through mediums that resonated most strongly with the youth, including hip-hop, traditional music, poems, and group dialogues.

The result was a four-part radio program based on the testimonies they documented. This informal truth-seeking process led by youth shed light on their perspectives and their role in the conflict as well as opened space for them to find their political voice. Inspired by that process and seeing the need for further action, the youth leaders formed their own association, the Réseau Action Justice et Paix, which continues to work to advocate for a more just society.

Through this project, youth leaders were agents driving their own truth-seeking process. ICTJ and UNICEF provided the support, resources, and scaffolding, and together the youth determined the outcome. Innovative, youth-led work on a smaller, local scale proved successful in generating momentum and building a new group of active youth leaders committed to carrying out justice work in the long term.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Transitional justice aims to achieve justice for past violations, break patterns of impunity and violence, and prevent recurrence. It is impossible to expect that level of change to happen over the course of a two- to three-year programmatic grant cycle. Instead, practitioners should aspire to catalyze a process by which youth are in a position to exercise their agency around social, political, and economic issues and keep pushing for the change they want to see. Programmatic approaches should empower young people with the necessary space, support, and resources to challenge forces of oppression, injustice, and exclusion. Media predominantly focuses on youth as spoilers and potential terrorist recruits, but what gets less attention is the fact that if youth are meaningfully engaged, the potential returns are extremely high.

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The following guiding principles are recommended for practitioners seeking to meaningfully engage youth in transitional justice work:

- Approach youth with respect as citizens and subjects, not objects: Policymakers and practitioners should engage with youth as citizens, appreciate their value and role in society, and support them in exercising their political agency.
- Take the time to identify the right youth partners: Undertake a rigorous stakeholder analysis, and look beyond formal youth “institutions” or youth leaders to also engage with horizontal movements, activists, and organizations with youth members.
- Develop two-way partnerships: Ask questions and genuinely listen to youth about their perceptions of the past and present, as well as their critiques of the current approach to transitional justice issues such as fighting impunity. Their critiques can provide useful insights into how to adapt transitional justice approaches to be more innovative and effective in a specific context.
- Practitioners committed to supporting youth engagement should leverage their power to help open, and keep open, the space for youth to exercise their political agency. One example is to invite individuals in power to attend a workshop and listen to those who have been marginalized. It is important to not speak on behalf of youth but rather create the opportunity for them to engage directly with people to whom they would not otherwise have access.
- Practitioners working with youth should focus on setting up a process that facilitates civic engagement in the transitional justice process but they should not predetermine the outcomes.
  - This calls on practitioners to accept some level of uncertainty and risk and be open to take the work in new and unanticipated directions in response to the ideas generated by the youth involved in the process.
  - This calls on donors to adjust their proposal and reporting requirements to allow for flexibility and to encourage a process-focused approach. This can be done, for example, by emphasizing the strategy that will be used to identify partners, the methodology used to facilitate the co-creation of strategies, and ways practitioners plan to support the process without determining its outcome.