

Conflict and exile: peacebuilding beyond the national border

Forced displacement has been recognised as a major consequence of the armed conflict in Colombia, sometimes forcing victims to leave the country in exile. As part of its mandate, the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repitition (hereafter Truth Commission) has an ambitious goal of collecting testimonies from around the world so that the diaspora can participate fully in their country's truth-telling process.

According to the National Victims' Registry, there are over 8,500,000 victims of the armed conflict and 7,500,000 victims of forced displacement. It is unknown exactly how many victims are living abroad but the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates it to be approximately 400,000 - it is likely to be even higher.

Colombians who were forced to cross national borders are now living in neighbouring countries, as well as in Europe, the United States and Canada. But moving has brought with it new challenges and many have been retraumatised by the impact of discrimination, isolation, loss and guilt.

How can the diaspora be involved in a Truth Commission?

The Truth Commission is working in 18 countries, including Canada, Ecuador, Argentina, Costa Rica, France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain and the UK, to hear the testimonies of Colombians who fled the country during the conflict and to uncover and explain why so many people were forced to leave. Another fundamental aim of the Truth Commission is to make their experiences, which are relatively unknown within Colombia, visible within the country's historical memory.

Carlos Beristain is the Commissioner responsible for including members of a diaspora in the work of the Truth Commission, which has never before been undertaken in a transitional justice process at this scale.

In the first 10 months of operation, the Truth Commission, led by Beristain, has been working with trusted civil society and victims' organisations across the world to build trust, inform people about the commission's mandate and process and to learn more about their expectations, needs, and concerns. More than 120 people have been trained so far, operating from within country specific 'nodes' to collect the testimonies of Colombians living in exile and to support the commission's pedagogy and dissemination strategy.



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Truth-seeking in Europe

In May 2019, the Truth Commission signed a formal agreement with the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) to facilitate work with victims of the conflict in Europe.

ICIP will exercise the role of the technical secretariat of the Truth Commission in Europe to coordinate the different country working group 'nodes' and victims' organisations and offer technical, methodological and logistical support.

In March 2019, this collaboration brought together forty participants with experience working with victims of the Colombian armed conflict, in a workshop designed to facilitate the training of those collecting testimonies.



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