

The Truth Commission and the Colombian diaspora: Considerations of the psychosocial focus

One of the central challenges of the Truth Commission is that both those giving their testimonies and the interviewers who are taking the testimonies require certain tools to manage the emotional impact of giving and listening to these stories. For the Commission, the importance of these testimonies lies not only in understanding the complexity of the internal armed conflict in the country, but also in recognising the stories of both victims and perpetrators throughout the years. This is where the psychosocial focus attempts to respond to this challenge, by integrating professionals within the different teams that take testimonies. The aim is to design strategies that promote the mental health and care of the interviewees and the interviewers before, during, and after the giving of testimonies.

Psychosocial support takes on a special meaning for the Colombian diaspora who have been living in other countries for years, in many cases in exile, as a result of the armed conflict. The Colombian Truth Commission is pioneering the incorporation of testimonies from Colombian citizens living in different parts of the world, including Europe. For the first time, a truth commission is recognising the voices of the exiled at a global level, and is incorporating these voices into the final report. At present, the commission has received 400 accounts from more than 14 participating countries.

In previous snapshots we have discussed the role of the 'hubs' that have been formed in every country to support the work of the Commission in the different territories. In this snapshot, we will reflect on the importance of psychosocial work with the population in exile, and the advances that have been made within this process, particularly in the United Kingdom.

What is happening in the United Kingdom?

In partnership with psychologists who are experts in psychosocial work, along with the UK and Ireland hubs and other NGOs, Peter Drury, representative of the Truth Commission in the United Kingdom, is working on the design and implementation of psychosocial support for the giving of testimonies in this country. The central purpose of the strategy is to build trusting relationships between the testimony givers and the interviewers through careful support during all parts of the process.



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The first stage in promoting the emotional wellbeing of those taking part in the Truth Commission process is creating safe and trusting spaces to listen to the interviewees, their doubts, pressures and concerns. Self-care is a central element - it implies that the individuals that are listening to the stories of people who have been directly or indirectly affected by the armed conflict on a daily basis also need specific spaces to reflect on their own emotions. The first session focusing on self-care and how to manage emotions was held on the 22nd February with health professionals who were responsible for giving practical tools to the five interviewees taking testimonies in the United Kingdom.

In the case of those giving their testimonies, the strategy (which is still in its development stages) is based on supporting these individuals before, during and after the sharing of their stories. The 'before' is focused on preparing the individuals for the emotions that they might experience while they are telling their stories. This process will take place with the interviewees before the testimonies are given. Once the person starts to tell their story, the interviewer must actively listen as much to the oral account, as to the emotional response of the individual giving their testimony.

After the interview, different processes can be followed:

- If a person is in need of greater individual support, they can contact associated institutions in the United Kingdom that can provide the relevant services.
- If a person would like to share their story with the Colombian diaspora community, there is the possibility of creating workshops with groups of testimony givers to create informative or symbolic accounts of their experience of the Truth Commission. Some of these collective initiatives have already been presented in Colombia at the truth 'Encuentros'.

We hope that this type of activity can be replicated in the United Kingdom in the future. Embrace Dialogue values the advances in psychosocial support in the wider region in exile, and invites all of the Colombian community living abroad to consider giving their testimonies before June 2020, the closing date for the interviewees to receive testimonies.

If you would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact us.



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