

INNOVATION & DOCUMENTATION

Rethinking transitional justice
from the ground up



How we want to address the current crisis in transitional justice by learning from grassroots initiatives

For over two decades, critical transitional justice scholars have emphasized the shortcomings of many formal transitional justice processes. Low levels of context-sensitivity, the frequent instrumentalisation of victims, inadequate timelines, overly legalistic approaches, unbridled institutionalisation, and dynamics of (post-)colonial and epistemic violence – are only a few of the elements that have been problematised.

Yet, when looking at what is happening in practice, transitional justice language and initiatives seem to be flourishing and ever-expanding. They are notably finding their way into an increasingly broad and diverse range of justice struggles, including in contexts where transitional justice initiatives are not proposed as part of a political transition or peace accords, but to address very different kinds of large-scale violence, like historical injustices or ongoing conflict. These diverse manifestations of transitional justice are often so distinct from standardized interventions that they, too, challenge the foundation of the transitional justice paradigm.

Rather than dismissing these - often grassroots – justice initiatives, we want to better understand them, and explore which elements they contain for addressing the current sense of crisis in the field. How can we learn from the innovations, ambitions, and experimentation happening in these cases to rethink and reconstruct the standard mechanisms and objectives of transitional justice?

We propose a mixed-method actor-oriented approach to analyse the practices and ambitions of grassroots justice actors in six paradigmatic cases. This analysis will foreground documentation initiatives, and will start to reconstruct the transitional justice paradigm on the basis of these very concrete initiatives.

Why we focus on documentation

In spite of critiques, grassroots justice actors are increasingly and explicitly turning to transitional justice language and practices as a means to resist injustices and disrupt dynamics and structures contributing to harm. In doing so, they often develop innovative and creative approaches to transitional justice, and propose new ways of 'doing' transitional justice. Their experimentation can often be understood in light of the absence of standardised transitional justice programs and the need to contextualise mechanisms that were developed for different kinds of contexts.

Documentation is often a central element in many of these initiatives. And a lot of innovation is happening in the realm of documentation – often for very pragmatic reasons related to limited access to official archives or lack of state support, but also due to the availability of new technologies or the diverse range of actors involved. Documentation is moreover also a central component of the standard mechanisms of transitional justice: justice, truth, repair, memorialization, and non-recurrence. We therefore examine how innovations in the realm of documentation invite for a re-imagining of the entire transitional justice paradigm, in line with current grassroots practices.

What we aim to achieve

By systematically learning from these grassroots justice struggles and how they mobilize transitional justice in practice, we want to move beyond mere critiques of standardized transitional justice interventions. We seek to explore how innovation happening in practice can help futureproof a paradigm that continues to be highly relevant for many grassroots justice actors on the ground. In doing so, we aim to bridge the current gap between theory and practice, and ensure that we (re-)centre grassroots justice actors as the drivers of new developments in both theory and practice.



In an academic sense, this project aims to advance the frontiers of our empirical understanding of transitional justice in so-called paradigmatic contexts, where grassroots justice actors mobilize the paradigm 'against the odds'. We seek to develop a future-oriented transitional justice paradigm, which can respond to critical scholarship, through a sound theorisation of current proposals for innovation by grassroots justice actors. By bringing these actors back to the centre of the debate and envisioning the further theorisation of transitional justice on the basis of what actors in a wide range of contexts are doing we envision constructing a more response and future-oriented transitional justice paradigm.

In a practical sense, closing the gap between critical theory and the day-to-day practice of transitional justice, will re-embed the paradigm of transitional justice in the lived realities of those most involved in the struggle for justice. This will allow the paradigm to continue to offer a relevant framework for furthering justice struggles across a wide range of contexts. The project has been formulated on the basis of our work with local stakeholders, and we continue to benefit from their advice to implement the project in practically meaningful ways.

PROJECT COORDINATION



Tine Destrooper
Principal investigator



Elke Evrard
Research Coordinator



Brigitte Herremans
Research Coordinator

We are supported by an expert advisory board, including Habib Nassar, Michael Hurtado Reed, Bono Olgado, Amanda Grzyb,, as well as by a wide network of local stakeholders.

artwork: Ibtisam al-Barak and Aaron Lapeire