

Season 7, episode 1 (May 2026)

Documentation in Uganda

Amanda: Welcome to this new episode of the Justice Visions podcast. My name is Amanda Rossini Martins and it is my first time hosting this podcast series. I am a doctoral researcher at Justice Visions team as part of the GROUNDDOC Project, focused on the role of documentation in transitional justice processes. Last season we started with a mini series on documentation as part our new research project and you can learn more about it, the scope of the project, on justicevisions.org. Now we continue with the focus on some of the cases we are currently working on: Uganda, Mexico, Brazil, Turkey, and Syria. Today, we're going to be delving into the context of Uganda. And as a co-host with me here today is Justice Vision's colleague, also part of the Groundhog Project, Büşra Cebeci.

Büşra: Hello everyone, together we will be trying to understand better documentation efforts in the particular transitional justice context of Uganda, and more specifically with agender lenses. For that, we will talk to Sarah Kasande. Sarah is a justice visions colleague and also part of the GROUNDDOC project. Her case study focuses on Uganda, and she is a human rights lawyer and transitional justice practitioner. She is currently a doctoral researcher at Ghent University. Thank you for joining us, Sarah.

Sarah: Thank you, Amanda and Büşra. It's a pleasure to be part of the podcast.

Amanda: Just to set the context, you have been working for more than a decade within Uganda's transitional justice landscape. So could you tell us a bit more about your background and the Uganda's context of transitional justice, please?

Sarah: Before joining Justice Visions, I worked with the International Centre for Transitional Justice where I headed the Uganda programme for over a decade. I also led the initiative for transitional justice in Africa, a regional programme supporting transitional justice efforts across the continent. In this role, I provided technical assistance to the government of Uganda on the implementation on transitional justice processes that are aimed at addressing legacies of conflict and human rights violations that occurred in Northern Uganda. I also worked closely with victims and civil society organisations to shape processes that are victim centred and inclusive. This experience has allowed me to follow closely how transitional justice has unfolded in Uganda and across the continent and also to draw lessons from these processes.

Now, Uganda represents a complex transitional justice context. On one hand, Uganda has features commonly associated with typical transitional justice processes. In other words, transitional justice was initiated as part of a peace process following the end of an armed conflict between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army. On the other hand, Uganda defies the central features of transitional justice, in the sense that transitional justice is being

implemented in the midst of political repression and violence and in the absence of a political transition.

Büşra: Can you shed a light on why this is the case?

Sarah: Now, since gaining independence in 1962, Uganda has witnessed repeated cycles of violence and armed conflict. The most protracted of these was the armed conflict between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army. This conflict was characterised with widespread human rights violations and atrocities. Over 1.8 million people were forcibly displaced into IDP camps and over 75,000 people, mostly boys and girls, women and children were abducted and forced to fight within the LRA ranks. The conflict formally ended in 2006 following peace negotiations between the Lord's Resistance Army and the government of Uganda. Although the final peace agreement was never signed, the parties adopted a framework that became a blueprint for transitional justice in Uganda. The framework reflected the standard transitional justice toolbox in the sense that it provided for the usual transitional justice mechanisms, including truth seeking, criminal accountability, traditional justice processes and reparations. In 2019, the government adopted a national transitional justice policy that reaffirmed these mechanisms. Despite this progress, the formal progress in the sense of adoption of these policies, the implementation has stalled, and there's been very limited effort toward implementing these mechanisms.

Amanda: And could you briefly elaborate why the TJ process in Uganda has stalled and how civil society actors have responded to this inertia?

Sarah: To explain why transitional justice in Uganda has stalled, it is necessary to begin with understanding the nature of the Ugandan political system. Ugandan government can be best described as a semi-authoritarian regime. Such regimes maintain an outward appearance of liberal democracy by establishing formal institutions, judicial processes, and other mechanisms that are associated with constitutional governance. However, these formal structures coexist with a highly centralised and repressive system in which the rule of law is routinely undermined; constitutional freedoms are curtailed, and the institutions meant to check executive power are steadily weakened. This coexistence of democratic and authoritarian practises produces a political environment in which justice is neither fully denied nor fully realised. It is within this hybrid system that the Ugandan transitional justice process is unfolding. For years, the government of Uganda has sought to preserve the facade of commitment to providing redress to victims, holding perpetrators accountable and addressing the legacies of conflict. As I have noted, it initiated a series of technocratic processes that create an illusion of progress and produced frameworks and strategies that were aimed to signal this commitment to TJ agenda. But it lacked the political will for meaningful implementation. These processes have largely been cosmetic. And obviously, with the state's own involvement in human rights violations, coupled with the escalating repression, this has fundamentally undermined the prospects for a credible transitional justice process. Now, after years of engaging with and supporting state-led transitional justice processes with limited substantive

progress to show for it, civil society organisations, victims' groups have increasingly turned to community driven alternatives. These initiatives offer more realistic pathways for truth telling, recognition, social repair and prevention of future violence, filling out the void created by the stalled state led process.

Büşra: We know that documentation plays a role in many transitional justice initiatives. In the Ugandan context, how has documentation influenced justice processes?

Sarah: Indeed, documentation has played a central role in Uganda's transition of justice journey. At the height of the armed conflict in the 90s and the early 2000s, documentation emerged as a response to ongoing violence. Local NGOs, cultural institutions, and community groups recorded killings, abductions, displacement, and sexual violence as these crimes were being committed. This work often took place at the extreme risk and with very limited resources. These early documentation efforts mattered. They helped make the scale and patterns of violence visible beyond the affected communities, they informed international advocacy and contributed to external pressure that led to the peace negotiations in 2006 between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army, and eventually the end of conflict.

Civil society documentation has played an important foundation for criminal accountability. As you know, Uganda was the first country to refer a situation to the International Criminal Court. The documentation, the information of atrocities that was collected by civil society helped establish patterns of violence, identify victims and perpetrators, and also preserve information that could serve as foundational evidence. So these efforts supported the investigative initiatives of the International Criminal Court.

Amanda: And do you see the role of documentation changing over time?

Sarah: After the conflict formally ended, documentation has still continued. Different actors continue to document the long-term impact of the violence, particularly on individuals, the families and communities. This has included documentation of the impact of living in internally displaced camps, the impact of stigma on victims of conflict-related sexual violence, as well as the loss of livelihoods and the challenges that the conflict has created, in particular the intergenerational effects. Documentation serves multiple purposes. It preserves memory in the absence of a truth-seeking process. It provides recognition to victims whose harms have never been officially acknowledged. It also allows victims to claim dignity in contexts shaped by silence and denial. Critically, it challenges official narratives that seek to minimise or distort the conflict and transmit history of violence to younger generations who did not experience the war. Civil society organisations have used documentation as an advocacy tool and continue to do so. And survivor testimonies, particularly survivors who have recorded what they have gone through, have formed a critical basis for advocacy for reparations.

Büşra: Could you share concrete examples of the different types of documentation that are carried out or how this work looks like in practise?

Sarah: Now, documentation in Uganda has taken both conventional and community-driven forms. Civil society, as I have noted, have been the leading actors in documentation, documenting past violations. So, we have organisations such as the Refugee Law Project, which has the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre in an area called Kitgum in Northern Uganda. We have the Justice and Reconciliation Project, and many others who have collected victims' testimonies, documented massacres, identified sites of mass graves and preserved records of these widespread atrocities.

The documentation outputs have included memory books, lists of names of persons who were killed or those who have been forcibly disappeared or abducted, as well as detailed narratives of how the atrocities were committed and the actors that were involved, as well the government's failure to act. As noted, these forms of documentation play a critical role in preserving this historical record of what happened. At the same time, we have the non-conventional community-based documentation practises which have flourished particularly amongst women survivor groups. These groups use art, music, storytelling, embroidery, and collective memory practises to document their experiences of conflict. Groups which I have had the privilege of working with, such as the Women's Advocacy Network, Watye Kigen and Golden Women Vision Uganda use these storytelling circles and drawings to capture the harm they suffered and how they continue to navigate loss and the impact of conflict. These documentation practises often take place at home, in churches, at community halls, and at times under big mango trees. Gulu in northern Uganda is very famous for big mango trees, which are also very delicious. So, these documentation practices also critically prioritise collective expression, healing, and recognition. They expand what counts as documentation in the transitional justice settings beyond what we originally know, which is written outputs.

Amanda: Could you specify which local actors are mostly involved with documentation processes in the scope of transitional justice in Uganda?

Sarah: Thank you for that question, Amanda. There are a variety of actors that are involved in documentation, as I have already highlighted. These include civil society organisations. We have international and local NGOs who document, obviously, for different purposes, including accountability and advocacy. We have cultural and religious institutions, such as the Ker Kwaro Acholi and the Acholi Religious Peace Initiative, who contribute to documenting community stories, mapping burial sites and performing rituals of remembrance, particularly for those individuals who were killed during the massacres. Victims associations also play a critical role in documenting and their efforts are primarily driven by the aim to amplify their experiences and to push back against efforts to erase and minimise what they went through. Now Northern Uganda also has a phenomenon of community memorials where communities come together to set up memorial sites. We have examples such as Lukod or Barlonyo where the LRA committed mass atrocities and killed hundreds of people. Now each year

these communities come together around these memorial sites where they hold prayers, where they speak about their experiences. We will find on these memorial sites, there are monuments which have the names of the individuals that were killed during that particular massacre. So every year this is a place for reflection, but also critically to transmit this history to younger generations. Now, these atrocities happened in the 1990s and early 2000s, and we now have a very young generation in Uganda. So, it's important that they remember what happened to their families and their relatives, and these processes help contribute to that.

Büşra: Besides the community-led documentation efforts, has the state initiated any official documentation processes?

Sarah: Indeed, the government of Uganda as well attempted to undertake documentation through what they call the National Human Rights Documentation Project that was spearheaded by the Uganda Human Rights Commission. Now the process, according to the founding instrument, was aimed at establishing an authoritative record of the human rights violations that occurred in Uganda since 1986. 1986 is when the current government of Uganda took power. The motivation for this was primarily institutional, but eventually reflected an effort by the government to minimise the atrocities that were committed by state actors, but also exclude the state from being held responsible for human rights violations that had been perpetrated. Now, as the Human Rights Commission started collecting testimonies and information, particularly which had been documented by community actors, it emerged that National Resistance Army troops and the UPDF had actually committed a series of atrocities in some communities. Prominent among this was sexual violence against men, where sexual violence was used as an act of torture, as an act to humiliate and demoralise particular communities. When this information began emerging. It became evident that the state could not suppress it. And therefore, in turn, they ended up shutting down the national human rights documentation process. And this definitely indicated that they had no political interest in capturing histories of atrocities and creating that authoritative record that they talked about.

Büşra: Given the diverse motivations of the documentation actors in Northern Uganda, how do they interact with each other and what tensions or complementarities exist?

Sarah: Indeed, there is interaction between different documentation actors. As I have already mentioned, the local NGOs and international NGOs, victims groups, cultural and religious institutions, international justice bodies, and UN agencies. This interaction is sometimes collaborative. And in other instances, it is competitive, often shaped by power, access to resources, and differing motivations for documentation. So, for example, civil society organisations, victim's associations, whether they're international or local NGOs, documentation is primarily undertaken to support accountability efforts, to support advocacy for redress, to preserve memory, and also critically to prevent future violence. In many instances, we have these local NGOs who serve as

intermediaries because they work with these communities for years and are able to connect these international institutions, whether their justice bodies, such as the ICC, and affected communities and victims in that case. But in return, we also have these international bodies coming in to offer capacity building and training. So for example, the International Criminal Court has held a series of trainings, UN agencies have held a series of training on how civil society can document in a rigorous manner to meet efforts for accountability so that they document the information they collect has evidentiary value in an accountability process. However, there are tensions, as you have noted, that arise between these actors. Again, underpinned by aspects of power dynamics and different conceptualization of justice or different conceptualisation of the objectives they want to achieve. So far, as I've noted, while NGOs seek to pursue accountability and advocacy for religious and cultural institutions, documentation is primarily to rebuild social cohesion, to serve as remembrance, and often accountability is seen as undermining these efforts, as divisive towards the cultural institutions' objectives to bring societies together. But we also have tensions between local and international organisations, for example. Whereby local organisations who do most of the work collect this information feel that they do not get the necessary recognition or access the resources that they deserve because they don't have the same power, access and clout as international organisations. Similarly, survival organisations at times feel that their experiences are extracted and used for other aims, for instance, NGOs through their programming reporting that they're doing human rights work. So these tensions arise, but despite these divergent perspectives and approaches, we still have this very rich ecosystem of documentation actors who all work towards a collective goal towards justice.

Amanda: You mentioned earlier that women play an important role in leading some of the documentation processes. So could you tell us more how they engage in documentation in more specific or distinctive ways?

Sarah: Now, Uganda is a very deeply patriarchal society. Gender played a very critical role during the conflict. It shaped both women and men's experiences, and it continues to do so in the post-conflict process, including the transitional justice process. Although the National Transitional Justice Policy and the Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation provide gender inclusion or gender-sensitive approaches, these commitments have largely remained on paper. There has been limited redress for gendered harms, and women continue to be marginalised in decision-making processes, including processes that shape the transitional justice agenda. So in this context, grassroots documentation practises, particularly by women survivor groups, have emerged as an important pathway to agency, empowerment, trauma healing for women survivors. Through documentation, women get to decide what to record, how to narrate the harm they experience beyond the narrow confines of these formal processes, and when to share their stories. This control allows them to reclaim the narratives that were previously shaped by violence, stigma, and exclusion. So documentation, in a sense, becomes a space where women assert voice, reclaim their dignity, and transform private suffering into collective knowledge and collective healing.

Now, in Northern Uganda, as you may know, we had a large number of young people who were abducted. We still have a significant population of missing persons who were abducted mostly on their way to school as 10 or 11 year old. And to date, many of these women do not know what happened to their children, who obviously are now adults because of the lapse of time. So documentation has become a means through which women who have missing children cope with loss and resist erasure. So these mothers who have never learned what happened to their children for many years and who do not have either death certificates or graves or anything, just to show that they had this child, they try to preserve the memory of their children through storytelling. So for instance during those storytelling circles they share the names of their children, they share their nicknames at times, they share minor details of their habits, their practises. At times, they even show pictures, they share clothes. These are just small aspects that they do to try and keep the memories of their children alive and affirm that their lives actually mattered, even in the absence of official answers. Some women keep written lists of their missing children. Others sew them in their clothes and compose songs about these children. So these practises, these artistic practises serve as living records and also challenge silence and denial. They also reject the reduction of loss to numbers or statistics. As you know, often they refer to or 20,000 people were killed or 30,000 people are abducted, you know, those numbers without really looking at the individuals who constitute those numbers. So for many women, storytelling has become the only available form of truth-telling in a context where official truth-seeking has never materialised. So these practises, where women actually take their lead and control, have empowered women to shift from disempowered survivors to proactive agents of memory and justice claims. So turning documentation into a transformative process within a very restrictive political context.

Büşra: Why do you think we should be paying more attention to the role of documentation in transitional justice scholarship and practise?

Sarah: Documentation, much as it's not recognised as a standalone pillar of transitional justice, it plays a central role in transitional justice. Accountability efforts would not be available if there were no efforts of NGOs right from the time the field was established who documented harm and atrocities that were committed. And most of this documentation was done by grassroots actors. So it is important to pay attention to grassroots documentation practises because they continue to reshape how justice is imagined, not only by how harm is recorded, but also how the violations are named and that particularly violations that formal systems have tended to ignore. So I'll give you an example. For many years, sexual violence was limited to rape. For the case of Northern Uganda, sexual violence took diverse forms, whereby it was not just rape. We had aspects of sexual slavery. We had aspect of forced marriage, whereby women and girls were abducted and taken to serve as bush wives. In other words, the partners, conjugal partners of the rebel commanders. In that context, they provided free labour, they cleaned, they cooked, in addition to being subjected to rape and sexual violence. So this type of harm has not historically been adequately captured by aspects of sexual slavery or rape. So through these continued

narratives by grassroots actors explaining what these women went through and their children, then it was able to expand the scope so that forced marriage was not just seen as a peripheral aspect of harm that they suffered, but a key element that needs to be redressed and we've seen that that has happened at least at the international level, at the International Criminal Court. So by insisting that these harms matter and must be sanctioned, women survivors have contributed to the expansion of the legal boundaries of justice. In other words, harms that previously excluded are now actually being prosecuted and punished, as we've witnessed in the Dominic Ongwen case.

Amanda: To close this episode, maybe we would like to ask you the question that we ask all our guests, which is what is that gives you hope and where do you draw your inspiration from?

Sarah: Thank you for that question, Amanda. I derive my hope from the fact that, despite the constrained circumstances, victims and communities continue to organise and mobilise for justice. Despite the stalled state-led transitional justice process and politically repressive context, they continue to pursue and innovate different approaches in their communities that contribute to healing, social repair, and truth. The blocked phase of TJ has not extinguished their hopes for justice or their determination to achieve a better and just society. So this is what really inspires me. If people can live through such terrible violence and still continue to pursue what they believe and know is their right, the right to redress, then I am very happy to continue supporting such efforts and that gives me a source of inspiration.

Amanda: Thank you so much, Sarah, for feeding our brains with so much to reflect on, on transitional justice and beyond. It is truly fascinating how much you know about the Ugandan context and transitional justice process and this way of justice-making from the ground up.

Sarah: Thank you very much.

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