

**Season 7, episode 2 (June 2026)**

**Documentation in Mexico**

*Welcome to Justice Visions, a podcast about everything new in the domain of transitional justice. Justice Visions is hosted at the Human Rights Center of Ghent University. For more information, visit [justicevisions.org](http://justicevisions.org).*

**Büşra:** Welcome to the new episode of the Justice Visions Podcast. My name is Büşra Cebeci and I am a doctoral researcher at Justice Visions as part of the GROUND OC Project. Today our colleague Anna Karolina Chimiak is joining us. Anna is a doctoral research focusing on grassroots documentation efforts regarding enforced disappearances in Mexico. Anna, thank you so much for joining us today and I'm very happy to be co-hosting this episode with my colleague Amanda Rossini Martins.

**Amanda:** Hello everyone and thank you Anna for being part of this episode. To begin, could you tell us a bit more about your background and how it connects to the context of enforced disappearances in Mexico?

**Anna:** Thank you so much, thank you Büşra and Amanda. I'm very happy to join this conversation. I am a human rights lawyer and I have been a co-director of a human right organization in Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, the Centro de Justicia para la Paz y el Desarrollo (CEPAD). And I've spent over 10 years accompanying families of the disappeared and working on advocacy strategies to create and properly implement specialized institutions and laws that address enforced disappearances and support the families searching for answers.

**Büşra:** You have also worked closely with the families, right?

**Anna:** Yes, indeed. My experience has been profoundly grounded in working with families of the disappeared in Mexico, and they have shaped not only my understanding of justice and true seeking, but also my understanding love, care, courage, perseverance and trust. Since early 2016, I have accompanied families, providing them with legal and psychosocial support and working together on advocacy strategies for legislative and public policy reforms, as well as developing training and capacity building processes. In parallel, I deepened my understanding of the issue through practice and study, learning from diverse perspectives and experiences, but above all learning from the families themselves. Recently I started my position as a doctoral researcher and I feel privileged to continue working alongside families as my research focuses on documentation practices led precisely by families in Mexico in face of enforced disappearances and how these connect to broader debates on justice struggles. Accompanying families has always been at the center of my work and it provides the core motivation of my project to make their struggle visible and to amplify their voices.

**Büşra:** Building on that experience and especially the way you connect practice and research, I would like to zoom out a bit. Could you elaborate a bit more on the landscape of transitional justice in Mexico?

**Anna:** It is important to highlight from the beginning that Mexico is a context that both reflects and unsettles what we usually understand as transitional justice. On the one hand, the country displays many of the conditions typically associated with transitional justice scenarios: widespread and systematic violence, the involvement of state agents, persistent impunity, and ordinary justice systems that are enabled to respond effectively, describing the situation by many actors as a profound human rights or humanitarian crisis. But at the same time, Mexico does not fit the classic transitional justice model. This is because political change came through electoral alternations rather than peace accords or the political transition from the authoritarian regime. And the violence is still ongoing and continues to grow every day, deeply intertwined with corruption and state criminal collusion, where the boundaries between the state institutions and criminal groups are so blurred that it becomes difficult to distinguish where the state ends and organized crime begins. Considering this complexity of violence in Mexico that has continued over decades, the transitional justice agenda has gained significant attention at different moments, especially around the 2018 elections when there were high expectations that the state would finally initiate broader democratic reforms to address human rights violations and harms, especially related to the so-called dirty war from the late 1960s to the 1990s that involve state-led repression against political opponents.

**Amanda:** So you are highlighting different relevant moments that shaped the transitional justice agenda in Mexico. Could you tell us a bit more about the practices and initiatives that emerged as a result of this increased attention to transitional justice?

**Anna:** This moment led to various institutional initiatives, such as Special Prosecutor's Office to investigate crimes committed by state actors during the Dirty War in 2001, Truth Commission in states of Guerrero or Oaxaca, or more recently the National Commission for Access to Truth, Historical Clarification and the Promotion of Justice for Serious Human Rights Violations committed between 1965 and 1990 established in 2021, among others. While these initiatives offered important possibilities, in practice they have not led to substantial progress, hindered by institutional resistance, political interference, and entrenched by power dynamics. As a result, transitional justice as often existed more as political discourse and false expectations than as a sustained and effective state-led process.

**Büşra:** Beyond this state led process, are victims playing a role in setting the transitional justice agenda in Mexico?

**Anna:** Yes, their role is fundamental within today's ongoing crisis of violence and insecurity and in the absence of effective institutional responses. Victims

themselves, particularly families of the disappeared but also relatives of those affected by extrajudicial killings or femicides, have pushed for the creation of mechanisms to address both past and ongoing violence and to advance the protection of their rights. As a result, the Truth and Justice Commission for the Ayotzinapa case was established, a mechanism with a mandate limited to that specific case only, while other initiatives with wider national reach, often referred to as extraordinary mechanisms (*mecanismos extraordinarios*), were also created and could be understood as a part of a broader transitional justice process.

**Amanda:** Could you give us more information about these extraordinary mechanisms?

**Anna:** Yes, these mechanisms include specialized legal and institutional frameworks, such as the General Victims' Law and the General Law on Disappearances, which created victims' assistance commissions and search commissions, as well as the establishment of the extraordinary forensic identification mechanisms. Although these mechanisms emerged from decades of victims' advocacy and carried significant expectations. They remain fragile, underfunded, highly bureaucratic, and ineffective. This reflects the broader challenges of pursuing transitional justice in a context where violence has not ended and where the state itself is implicated. And also in the setting where the State continues to refuse and fully acknowledge its own responsibility and the magnitude of what is happening. In many ways, this leaves families carrying the work and burden of true seeking and justice efforts on their own, assuming responsibilities that should be fulfilled by authorities.

**Amanda:** You mentioned earlier that it becomes difficult to distinguish where the state ends and organized crime begins, which really illustrates how complex the broader pursuit of justice becomes in this context. Since you've been working closely with many families of victims of enforced disappearances, could you talk about how this crime fits into the broader landscape of transitional justice in Mexico?

**Anna:** Mexico faces an extremely grave and devastating crisis of enforced disappearances. During past years the UN committee on enforced disappearances has stressed repeatedly that enforced disappearance has become a widespread practice across large parts of the country and marked by almost absolute impunity. Today more than 132 000 people are officially registered as disappeared and the number continues to rise everyday. Although disappearances have escalated in recent years, this is not new. This has been happening for more than six decades. And in this regard, we can distinguish two major periods of disappearances in Mexico. The first consists of state-driven, politically motivated disappearances during the Dirty War from the late 1960s to the 1980s, 1990s as a part of repressive practices employed by the state against the population to eliminate any form of dissent or opposition to the regime. And the second period corresponds to the

disappearances that expanded alongside the strategy of militarization of public security and anti-drug policy from 2006, so-called war on drugs, which fuelled criminal violence, eroded the rule of law, and deepened an already unprecedented human crisis in the country. This second period is characterized by a broader diversity of perpetrators where these disappearances are perpetrated both by state and non-state actors, including organized crime groups with recurring patterns of their collusion and joint actions.

**Büşra:** Did the state play an important role in enforced disappearances?

**Anna:** Yes, indeed. In recent years we have observed a clear increase in cases directly involving authorities. And as I highlighted, it is difficult to attribute responsibility to a single actor because the boundaries between state actors and organized crime are often faded. Besides, the state has consistently and deliberately failed to prevent, investigate and sanction these crimes. And crucially, the state persistently denies both the scale of the crisis and its own responsibility for it, minimizing its own involvement while attributing responsibility mainly to non-state actors or past governments. The crisis is further aggravated by a profound forensic emergency, directly linked to the scale of enforced disappearances and the criminal violence itself, becoming an environment in which human life is treated with alarming disregard. Between 2023 and 2024 alone, Mexican state authorities registered 1,451 clandestine graves, while nationwide, there are more than 72,000 unidentified bodies in mass graves, forensic facilities, and universities.

**Amanda:** Given this context, how do these discoveries reshape the way families understand the scale of this crisis and the role they themselves are forced to play in searching for the disappeared?

**Anna:** It was estimated by experts that under current conditions it would take at least 120 years to identify all the remains without even accounting for new cases that increase each year. This situation clearly demonstrates the state's inability to provide proper identification and dignified restitution. For many families of the disappeared, it will be impossible to reunite with their loved ones during their lives. This not only drives families to demand the creation of mechanisms capable of addressing the crisis, but it also forces them to act on their own and develop self-organized efforts for searching and identification. One of the examples of their work that strongly illustrates the Mexican context was a burial site discovery in Rancho Izaguirre, Teuchitlán, Jalisco, that happened a year ago. It exposed the brutality of forced recruitment and enforced disappearance, but also revealed the depth of structural impunity and the enormous risk that searching families face.

**Büşra:** Could you elaborate on the role of the families of disappeared as justice-seeking actors in this content?

**Anna:** Families of the disappeared in Mexico have created their own grassroots justice efforts, adapting constantly to the adverse conditions, risks, state dynamics and political contexts. In recent years, in the face of the widespread crisis on enforced disappearances, there has been a considerable rise in number of local victim search collectives. These groups have formed powerful social and political movements and coalitions, dedicated to searching for the disappeared, confronting chronic impunity, supporting one another, making the crisis visible and pushing for structural reforms. They act in the absence of effective state action, they also engage directly with institutions, but at the same time they also act against the state, making visible the situation and demanding justice at local, national and international levels, refusing to be pushed out of the public conversation. And during this process they have gone through a profound transformation. And they have moved from grief, uncertainty, stigma, ambiguous laws and marginalization to becoming activists and experts who occupy public space, who influence public debate and shape institutional agendas. They carry out, for example, field searches, searches for the living in prisons and rehabilitation centers, administrative searches in forensic institutions and public registries, nationwide dissemination campaigns, advocacy and policy design, protests, and the creation of spaces of memory among many, many other actions. They are also the ones who are finding more disappeared than the state itself.

**Amanda:** What stands out to me here is how families have become central actors in the search for truth and justice, filling institutional voids while also challenging the state. In this process, what motivates their documentation practices?

**Anna:** Their documentation practices are diverse, creative, relational, and deeply intentional. At their core, these efforts are driven by the need to find their loved ones and establish what happened to them. Families document to generate the information that institutions fail to produce and to build the evidence needed for search, for truth, and for justice processes. But their objectives go far beyond that. Through these practices, families challenge official state narratives, confront impunity, expose patterns of state responsibility, and make visible forms of violence that would otherwise remain hidden. Their work also sustains memory across generations, keeping the names, the stories, and the presence of the disappeared alive in public spaces. At the same time, these documentation efforts become a form of political participation. Families use them to advocate for institutional change, push for better laws, and draw national and international attention to the crisis. In this sense, documentation is not only a technical activity, but also an act of resistance, of care, and of collective organization.

**Amanda:** Having considered these objectives, how is their documentation actually carried out? What does it look like in practice then?

**Anna:** In practice, documentation can take many shapes, from personal folders with paper records, to collective databases used for searches and

identifications, to public reports that inform advocacy efforts. It includes notebooks, maps and registries linked to searches and clandestine graves, the use of social media, contextual reports and citizen-led databases. It also includes memorialization initiatives, and there we can find cookbooks, letters, embroidery, the display of photographs and search flyers in public spaces, artistic expressions like murals, songs, exhibitions, and books that tell the story not only of the disappeared, but also of *buscadoras*, of who search for them. And regarding the search flyers, which is one of the tools that families use to search and to make their loved ones visible in public spaces. This connects directly to what was happening, for example, a few weeks ago in Jalisco state in Mexico, where very recently there was a reform proposal to prohibit the public posting of search flyer in the state. And this is especially worrying because Jalisco is hosting events during the World Cup in June and these kinds of restrictions can be seen as “cleaning” the public image of the state and erasing the reality of enforced disappearances rather than addressing the crisis. So it will be crucial to closely observe what is happening in Mexico now and during these weeks. And of course, going back to documentation practices, there are also international reporting efforts, for example, engagement with human rights mechanisms, which could open new pathways for justice and visibilisation of the situation in Mexico beyond the national level.

**Büşra:** What kind of international justice pathways are you talking about in the context of documentation efforts led by families and how do these efforts connect to transitional justice processes?

**Anna:** Families of the disappeared have consistently engaged with international legal avenues. They use documentation as a key advocacy tool to sustain their claims, to provide information about the broader patterns and dynamics of disappearance, and to expose state responsibility or exert pressure on domestic authorities, especially given the context of the lack effective responses from authorities. Regarding enforced disappearances, there have also been submissions to the International Criminal Court, particularly concerning cases from Mexican states such as Coahuila, Nayarit and Veracruz. And at the same time, families and civil society organizations have actively engaged with both the Inter-American Human Rights system and the United Nations system, from special procedures to treaty bodies, such as the Committee on Enforced Disappearances or the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

**Amanda:** Could you share more information regarding the cases brought up to the Committee on Enforced Disappearances?

**Anna:** Yes, in fact Mexico has filled the highest number of Urgent Actions before the Committee on Enforced Disappearances and has received more recommendations than any other country and was the first country also visited by the Committee, largely due to the sustained advocacy of families of the disappeared. More recently, in 2025, the Committee activated for the first

time in its history the procedure under Article 34 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, which is an exceptional measure reserved for situations of extreme gravity when there are indications of widespread or systematic disappearances. And what is more, at the beginning of April this year, the Committee concluded that information it received from both civil society and the state showed well-founded indications that enforced disappearances in Mexico have been and continue to be committed as a crime against humanity, happening at different times and in different parts of the country, often with the direct participation, support or acquiescence of authorities. And based on this, the committee has asked the UN Secretary-General to urgently bring the situation of enforced disappearances in Mexico to the UN General Assembly. And the goal is to consider measures that would help Mexico to prevent, investigate, punish and eradicate this crime, including the recommendation to create effective mechanisms to uncover the truth. It is important to note that the Committee does not act as a commission of inquiry. And it's not required to reach a final factual conclusion, but the nature of this process is more preventive, aiming to mobilize international attention and support and not to establish individual criminal responsibility.

**Büşra:** This sounds enormous, crimes against humanity and the UN General Assembly, but what can this actually change in practice and what does this tell us about its relation to transitional justice?

**Anna:** This process is still unfolding and both its legal interpretation and its practical implications continue to evolve, particularly given its historical significance and the fact that this has been activated without any precedent. As this procedure represents the highest level of international scrutiny and as the Committee has framed and forced these appearances in Mexico as crime against humanity, it may also open spaces for more creative and transformative approaches. This includes the possibility, urgency and the pressure to generate mechanics that could meaningfully contribute to truth and justice for families. Some of these efforts led by families of the disappeared can be understood as part of broader transitional justice efforts or at least as steps that could help lay the foundations for future reforms and transitions.

**Amanda:** So could you elaborate on these efforts a little bit more?

**Anna:** For many years, for example, one of the key public demands from civil society, including victims groups, academics and human rights organizations, has been the creation of international mechanisms to address impunity in Mexico. For example, similar to CICIG in Guatemala. And yet, despite all of these efforts, the government has often remained defensive, frequently denying or minimizing the scale of crisis, and resisting both engagement with UN mechanisms and the work of local actors, what is also happening around the procedure under Article 34. Regarding international efforts, it is also important to highlight that families of the disappeared in Mexico have

actively engaged with families' organization from countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, Argentina, and Guatemala. Through these connections, they explore what tools, experiences and lessons might be meaningful in the Mexican context. These exchanges are deeply powerful and valuable, not only for sharing knowledge and strategies, but also for building mutual support, solidarity and inspiration among these facing similar struggles.

**Amanda:** Trying to connect some of the topics you've been explaining in your last answers, how do you see the relationship between enforced disappearances, the documentation efforts led by families of the disappeared, and transitional justice in Mexico?

**Anna:** Families of the disappeared in Mexico, they rarely invoke the language of transitional justice explicitly. Instead, they mobilize narratives grounded in its core pillars: truth, justice, memory, non-recurrence, and reparation, as well as an international human rights and humanitarian law, adapting these frameworks to a shifting and often adverse context that they face, and reshaping these notions to serve their needs and to strengthen their own processes of truth and justice seeking. Yet, as I mentioned before, through their demands, they have driven important institutional changes and have pushed for mechanisms often associated with transitional justice, such as search commissions, fact-finding missions, international accountability processes, or forensic identification mechanisms. At the same time, the discourse of transitional justice has been instrumentalized politically. For example, former president López Obrador frequently invoke the idea of the pacification of the country using language that echoed transitional justice, but without necessarily responding to the structural demands of families. And this is where documentation practices become particularly important. Families and civil society organizations in Mexico have developed their own forms of documentation, and in many ways, this documentation operates both as a response to the crisis and as a form of resistance. Families have been described as “chronicles of generalized violence”, documenting not only individual cases, but also the broader patterns and dynamics of disappearance. Over the past years, their struggle has been innovative and developed through learning, acquiring many specialized skills and constant exchange. And what is important is that through these practices: searching, documenting, organizing, and advocating, families have been expanding the understanding of what justice can mean in the context where the violence is ongoing.

**Büşra:** Before we close, where do you see hope and inspiration in this struggle?

**Anna:** What gives me hope is accompanying families of the disappeared and see how, despite all the difficulties, hurdles, and risks, they continue to search, document, and to organize, and to demand truth and justice, demonstrating extraordinary courage, strength, and dignity. And I think a big part of my hope comes from that belief that human dignity can prevail even in the darkest

circumstances. The love that families show in their everyday collective actions and transformations, in the way they search, they speak, they remember, insist, but also accompany themselves and others has been my greatest inspiration. It has shaped me not only professionally, but above all as a person. Their trust has been an honor and walking alongside them has marked me deeply. And perhaps I risk romanticizing their struggle, but they never chose this path and never wanted to become investigators, lawyers or policy makers. And yet in a country where disappearance has become painfully normalized, they step into those roles with determination, bravery, moral clarity and dignity. So for me, hope comes from seeing how victims are actively shaping the words and pathways through which justice and human dignity might one day become possible, even though right now it seems very far away. And having the privilege of accompanying those processes is what allows me to keep going, and learning how to use hope as a practice.

**Büşra:** Thank you, Anna, for sharing your experiences and insights with us today. And thank you to our listeners for joining this conversation. We hope this episode offered a deeper understanding of the important work led by families of the disappeared in Mexico.

**Amanda:** Thank you so much, Anna.

**Anna:** Thank you so much.

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