Dealing with the Past

Supporting people-centred "working-through" the legacies of violence

Beatrix Austin

What is the policy brief about?

This policy brief hones in on the specific ways in which a people-centred approach to dealing with the past can be built from the ground up, complementing the previous Berghof Policy Brief no. 5. It works through the commonalities and differences between transitional justice, reconciliation and dealing with the past; and puts emphasis on the dual roles of the victims and their potential in either escalating or de-escalating violent approaches to conflict.

Why is the topic relevant?

There is a substantive consensus that political and social violence leaves a heavy burden on the individuals and societies experiencing it. Experts agree that some form of "working through" this burden is necessary, unless the violence of the past return to re-fuel resentment, cripple agency and permanently block trust in people, groups and institutions. Currently, the exact form of working through is perceived as being too far removed from the "ordinary" people, or from a flexible and open approach rather than a toolbox attitude. This brief seeks to present some innovative practice at the grassroots, in order to establish core principles of good practice in supporting people-centred dealing with the past initiatives. It also discusses ways in which to counteract a "culture of victimhood" or "victimhood identity" which has been found to be detrimental to conflict transformation and peacebuilding processes.

For whom is it important?

The policy brief is aimed to inform international and local actors engaged in setting up or supporting dealing with the past, transitional justice and reconciliation programmes with a focus on rebuilding relationships: practitioners, policy-makers, policy advisors and agenda-setters.

Conclusions

Rebuilding society and polity after war is fundamentally about creating new and better horizontal and vertical relationships, at individual and collective levels. Supporting people in coming to terms with victimisation – either as victims or perpetrators or bystanders – is of central relevance. Most importantly, it is recommended that

- principled governmental and institutional commitment be expressed over the long term (recognising the importance of dealing with the past, modelling dedication to dealing with the past, funding initiatives);
- local grass-roots communities (individuals, families, groups) take the lead from the start;
- approaches and strategies are mixed and combined to ensure that the psychological and the material, the political and the social, the private and the political are not de-linked;
- small group and individual work (therapy of appropriate forms, physical or psychological, story-telling, meditation) is linked up with social and collective work (prosecution/justice, development/livelihoods, representation/political trust-building);
- narratives of lament are complemented by narratives of hope and nurture, as well as silence.

Content

About the Author

Beatrix Austin co-edits and coordinates the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. As a researcher, her interests focus on linking theory and practice in conflict transformation as well as approaches to dealing with the past. Before joining Berghof she worked for Search for Common Ground and International Alert, among others. She is a founding member of the Vienna Conflict Management Partners and a member of the training team of the Vienna School of Negotiation. Beatrix graduated with an MPA from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and holds a diploma in Political Science/International Relations from the Free University in Berlin.

Relevant publications include: (with Martina Fischer) (eds.): *Transforming War-related Indentities. Individual and Social Approaches to Healing and Dealing with the Past.* Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 11. Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2016; "Berghof Foundation. Verständigung und Versöhnung durch Konflikttransformation", in: Corinne Defrance and Ulrich Pfeil (eds.): *Verständigung und Versöhnung nach dem „Zivilisationsbruch" - Deutschland in Europa nach 1945*, 2016; (with Martina Fischer and Hans J. Giessmann) (eds.): *Advancing Conflict Transformation. The Berghof Handbook II.* Opladen & Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2011.

1 Introduction

Today, there is much agreement that a form of addressing past violence (be that mass atrocities, massive human rights violations, large-scale political or social violence) is indispensable if societies are to transform the conflicts that were at the root of the violence and arrive at a peaceful future.

The role that "dealing with the violent past" plays in conflict transformation efforts in post-war / post-violence societies is crucial yet embedded: it is a necessary, but not a sufficient measure to bring about more peaceful relations, a public and private existence in equality and fairness and, maybe, one day, reconciliation. Experts stress, with very little contestation, that violations of the past have surfaced over and over again. "Unreconciled issues from past violence never disappear simply by default, and the potential threat to stability and security suggests a need to ensure they are dealt with." (Bloomfield 2006, 9). In addition, the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities remain at stake long after the direct violence has ended.

"Working through" past violence, victimhood, accountability and the future shape of a society must be done by and with those who have lived through it or who are affected by it. It is essentially a people-based and relational process. If violence essentially breaks down (civic) trust and (personal) relationships, the central task in addressing the legacies of the past will be to restore both trust and relationships. Such efforts to heal and rebuild community and society after war and violence need to happen on an individual and on a collective level (Austin/Fischer 2016). They need to take a holistic outlook (Sisson 2012) and need to move horizontally (fostering relationships between people and groups) as well as vertically (instilling trust into institutions, from the local to the international) (Simpson in Accord Insight 2016, 5). Finally, they need to reach victims, perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers of the past violence.

Among these groups, we are urged to give the victims utmost attention. That is, on the one hand, just and necessary in righting wrongs, restoring trust and enabling a more peaceful future. However, it has also been observed that an all-encompassing and static focus on victimhood may have detrimental effects on conflict transformation and peacebuilding, as it can heighten isolation and confrontation, and hinder agency and trust-building (both horizontally and vertically): victimhood can then come to be seen as an unchangeable identity rather than an experience to (keep) working through. Framed with a view to policy-making: "while the participation of victims in dealing with the past processes is important, encompassing approaches to transitional justice also need to facilitate the inclusion of groups such as former combatants or repressive police forces that have perpetrated violence" (FriEnt 2016).

The ways in which such "grounded" processes for dealing with the past can best be nurtured are at the centre of this policy brief. The brief looks first at the terminology in the field, comparing transitional justice, reconciliation and dealing with the past, locating victimisation as a central challenge in each. Second, it presents examples of working through legacies of the past from three different contexts. Third, it discusses victimisation as a frequently counter-productive dynamic in working on the legacies of a violent past, and highlights the balancing act between doing justice to victims without enshrining victimhood. Finally, it presents conclusions and recommendations.

2 Transitional Justice – Reconciliation – Dealing with the Past

The terminological terrain of dealing with large-scale, social and political violence of the past is marked by three, partially overlapping but distinct concepts, which also carry three distinctive "philosophies": transitional justice, reconciliation and dealing with the past. While they differ, ultimately they strive to meet the overarching goal of "rebuilding damaged relations so that social functions can recommence" (Bloomfield in Accord Insight 2016, 46).

Transitional Justice

The term Transitional Justice has, over the past decades, arguably become the most influential of the three in terms of shaping national and international policy. First heralded by the human rights movement, it covers all measures which aim at bringing justice to the victims of violence and bringing to justice its perpetrators. Today, it refers to a broad range of measures, covering the establishment of tribunals, truth commissions, lustration of state administrations, settlement on reparations, and also political and societal initiatives devoted to fact-finding, reconciliation and cultures of remembrance (Fischer 2011, 407). While the judicial aspects are clearly still at the forefront of transitional justice, many of its proponents advocate a more encompassing or holistic understanding (Boraine 2006).

As important as the concept of transitional justice has become in guiding policy (EEAS Factsheet 2012), it is not without its limitations. These limitations are in part due to the form of implementation over the past decades as an often externally-pushed agenda (Jones/Brudholm 2015). They are also due to a realisation that while justice is of the utmost importance in post-war recovery, what is equally important is for people to become able to come to terms with delays in justice, with the incompleteness of justice, and with the fact that even after juridical justice may be done, mourning, grief and isolation may continue.

Victims have traditionally had a limited role in transitional justice, although calls for putting them and their needs centre stage can be heard increasingly over the course of transitional justice's development, and much progress has been made in terms of victim involvement, victim protection and victim redress. Still, courts as recent as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia have come under criticism by human rights organisations and women's organisations for their strong focus on due procedure which may protect perpetrators rights at the cost of victims' wellbeing (Fischer 2011, 408/409).

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a highly inspirational and evocative guiding notion and, at the same time, a fairly unwieldy "beast" for many who are concerned with the legacy of a violent past. It refers to, in its most concentrated form, the "building or rebuilding of relationships damaged by violent conflict" (Simpson in Accord Insight 2016, 5). As such, it is not a soft or secondary option: "Reconciliation is as important as justice. And as necessary. And as difficult." (Bloomfield in Accord Insight 2016, 45). A central publication on reconciliation calls it "both a goal and a process" (Bloomfield et al. 2003, 12). On the one hand, it is a vision that many strive for – a state of being at peace with the past and its actors, magnanimous and liberating. On the other hand, it is, especially on a community, societal and political level, an aspiration that seems too far-fetched, too religiously loaded for those whose beliefs are different. For some, it seems simply too much to expect of

victims of violent conflict and injustice. And while the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission under its chairman Desmond Tutu has become emblematic for the power inherent in creating a national narrative of reconciliation and forgiveness, there are now – as described for the area of transitional justice above – critical voices also debating the legacy of the TRC (Chapman/van der Merwe 2008) and the virtue of (externally imposed) reconciliation processes (Jansen 2013).

Victims are central protagonists in any process of reconciliation, as it is the victims who bestow or withhold trust into a newly developing political or social order. However, in externally accompanied or shaped reconciliation processes, care must be taken not to pressurise victims into forgiveness – or closure: "What's closure? What, you don't talk about it anymore? No there's no such thing as closure. Closure is a nice way of society saying, 'for fuck sake dry your eyes and go on', that's what closure is. Closure is not about you, closure is about everybody else; that's what closure is about. For you it's about learning to live with a new situation and dreaming about the past. Closure is definitely someone else's agenda because how can you close on something that's in your head. How can you ever forget your brother or your mother or father or your sister?" (quoted after Hamber in Austin/Fischer 2016, 8).

Dealing with the Past

Against this backdrop, dealing with the past shall be understood as the overarching term for a set of measures embedded in the social and political, private and public realm which is aimed at re-connecting the social fabric after mass violence, with a high degree of openness in terms of its "repertoire" and of its end state, other than the goal to enable people to live life decently, to enable society to relate peacefully, and to enable political and social institutions to function effectively. Dealing with the past, in this understanding, may have the greatest capacity to accommodate the messy reality of transitional periods as well as periods in which the past re-visits communities which thought it over and done with.[1]

Victims ought to have a weighty say in how to shape such dealing with the past processes. However, its success will depend on the (eventual) integration of the perspectives and lives also of those considered perpetrators (who may have been, or consider themselves, victims, too), and of those who as bystanders or outsiders generally are given much less attention. Dealing with the past is inherently a holistic process (Swisspeace 2016a; Sisson 2012), often spanning generations and requiring analysis and action on many different levels: the personal and public, the gendered experiences of violent conflict (Swisspeace 2016b), the private and the political, the economic and the spiritual. As such, it is intensely complex, yet can be approached step-by-step and over time.

What such steps can look like over the course of different stages in violent conflict (post-agreement, virulent conflict, 'frozen' conflict) is the subject of the next section. While work is needed simultaneously on the social-political and institutional plane, the following section focuses discussion on the individual-social aspect first and foremost. This is seen as crucial for the other work to gain traction, and hence is emphasised here. All examples, at the same time, highlight "on-ramps" for connecting individual, small group work with affecting the larger, social-political context: community (re-)development in Northern Ireland (health, jobs); educational reform in Israel-Palestine; and public discussion and broadcasting in Georgia/Abkhazia.

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1 Of course, this definition is not uncontested, see for example Simpson (in Accord Insight 2016, 6): "… dealing with the past frames a narrow perspective and focus that is essentially retrospective, and that consequently undermines the critical preventive function of reconciliation strategies in making peace sustainable." To me, and in light of the debates around both transitional justice and reconciliation, this seems too negative a judgment. Here, dealing with the past is used as a broader and more encompassing category, into which both transitional justice and reconciliation strategies can fall. Dealing with the past, in order to qualify as a peace strategy in the first place, is always dealing with the past for a better future.

3 A Look Inside: Three People-Centred Approaches

In the following, I will highlight three examples for hands-on, people-centred work supporting victims and survivors of violent conflict. The examples – taken from Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and Georgia/Abkhazia – encapsulate needs and good practice in people-centred dealing with the past projects. They also locate dealing with the past efforts along different stages of the conflict and peacebuilding spectrum: post-agreement, violent conflict and a 'frozen' in-between state.

3.1 Northern Ireland: Transitional Justice at the Grassroots – "Making sense of the past in the present: Dig where you stand"[2]

The legacy of armed conflict: The violent inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland often referred to as the "Troubles" spanned 30 years, leaving an estimated 3,600 people on all sides dead. Over 50,000 people bore significant physical injuries, with countless others suffering from the psychological effects of decades of violence. This is "a legacy that continues to shape the post-1998 period".[3] The conflict, which – while clad in nationalistic and religious rhetoric – is also about political and social participation and territorial self-regulation, is now mostly waged with non-violent means. However, despite the robust power-sharing institutions in place since 2007, it has been noted that "there has been renewed paramilitary violence and continued social tensions and conflict triggered by contentious issues such as parades and flags" (Accord Insight 2016, 37).

While the discrimination, suffering and grief following the violence of the past is undeniably real, remembrance and politics in Northern Ireland have also been seen to lead to problematic outcomes: "... both contemporary Loyalism and Republicanism are cultures of victimhood ... in that paramilitaries on both sides refer to their status as victims in order to justify their recourse to armed conflict. Loyalists describe their victimisation at the hands of the IRA, whereas Republicans describe their victimisation by British imperialism and Loyalist sectarianism. ... The implications for political culture where victimhood becomes a socially institutionalised way of escaping guilt, shame or responsibility are far-reaching." (Smyth 2007, 80).

"Exploring the past together for a better future": The Belfast-based organisation Bridge of Hope offers an example of working through the experience of violence in an approach integrating both sides, and breaking down competitive victimhood. Bridge of Hope is a community-based health and wellbeing service that works with individuals, families and communities affected by the conflict.[4] It offers a holistic and complementary set of services, including physiotherapy, life coaching, counselling and psychological services, training, personal development courses and conflict legacy programmes. It has involved disadvantaged Belfast communities experiencing high levels of social and economic deprivation as well as health inequalities. These communities were sharply affected by the violent conflict – within a square mile of the organisation, 635 people lost their lives and over 2,500 people were injured as a result of the conflict. The programme is based on the principle "that people living in areas that experienced the worst impacts of the conflict have a

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2 Name of a programme run by the Belfast-based organisation Bridge of Hope, and a subsection in the TJ Grassroots Toolkit, see http://thebridgeofhope.org/conflict/making-sense-of-the-past-in-the-present/.
3 www.bbc.co.uk/history/troubles. 1998 saw the signing of the Belfast Agreement which „set forth arrangements for a Northern Irish Assembly and Executive Committee in which Unionists and Nationalist parties would share power. It also contained provisions on disarmament, police reform, demilitarization and the status of prisoners" (Accord Insight 2016, 37).
4 http://thebridgeofhope.org/about/.

vital contribution to make to the work of dealing with the past".[5]

In this context, the organisation has developed a grass-roots transitional justice toolkit (Rooney 2012, 2014). This toolkit originated in a community conversation initiated by Irene Sherry, Bridge of Hope's Head of Victims and Mental Health Services. Based on work with local community members on giving them a sense of personal healing and development opportunities, as well as engaging them in frank and painful, but at the same time honest and empathic discussions about their experience of the violent past and their frustrations and aspirations of the present, "the Toolkit Programme helps create frameworks of meaning for those affected by conflict in a structured way that ... avoids re-traumatisation. It also frames a broader conversation about what building blocks of reconstruction are required to create a more enabled and empowered society." In the toolkit, users are guided through a set of questions, enabling, in its own vision, "participants to map transition from the personal to the political" across five pillars: institutional reform, truth, reparations, reconciliation, prosecutions and amnesty (Rooney 2012, 4). The work, which is an outcome of a community-university partnership, has received much international and local praise. It is growing in its outreach, with trainings of trainers and translations into Arabic and Spanish being completed. The political environment, however, in which this grassroots work is taking place, is proving rather resistant to deep change.[6]

Good practice: The inspiration of this work grows from an understanding of the importance of working with survivors on both sides of the conflict divide. There is emphasis that dealing with the past needs to start with the personal lives of those most affected by the previous violence. Personal development work and therapy (sometimes as simple as physiotherapy to relax the body of memory) are important, as is grass-roots empowerment for working towards change in the own communities by, among other things, visiting the other community and communities elsewhere, which may have the capacity to inspire (self-)reflection and change.[7] In short: "the circumstances of local communities should be part of making any plan work." (Rooney 2014, 4.)

3.2   Israel-Palestine: Understanding the "double wall" – Personal development and education

The legacy of armed conflict: The conflict engulfing Israel and the Palestinian Territories is sometimes referred to as the most intractable conflict in the world. Virulent and often violent since the mid-20th century, it has claimed thousands of lives (exact numbers are contested on both sides). Next to the physical destruction it has wrought, it throws up numerous thorny questions about human rights, justice and the legacies of the past, which turn the current conflict into even more of a mine field. While the Jewish descendants in Israel point to the indescribable horrors of the Holocaust and the resulting right to a safe homeland and a guarantee of non-reoccurrence, the Palestinians highlight the deep pains of being driven from their land, exiled and living as refugees as well as being subjected to an occupation deemed unjust and inhumane. A deep sense of victimisation reaches back into ancient history on both sides (Rouhana/Bar-Tal 1998).

Both sides hence have ample reason to feel victimised and work under the extreme pressures of multiple violent pasts and presents. They perceive themselves "not only as victims of the current conflict, but as victims throughout history" (Vollhardt 2009, 139). What can be observed, as a result, is a waning of empathy and compassion, as well as a competitive comparison of whose victimisation should weigh more heavily: "the mutual suspicion, hatred and poisoning of minds among both people in relation to the 'other' have become so intense that sustaining a common bond has become impossible, except within very small and exclusive elite groups on each side" (Adwan et al. 2012, x). In general, the societies are marked by "feelings of fear, lack of respect, mistrust, dehumanisation and stereotypes against each other" (Darweish

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5   See fn. 4 and http://thebridgeofhope.org/conflict/transitional-justice/.
6   Steven McCaffery, "Some positive talking is going on in Belfast, just not at Stormont", The Detail, 26 Nov 2014.
7   For example, two study trips brought Bridge of Hope participants to Berlin in the years 2013 and 2014.

2010, 87). Using a concept originally introduced to describe troubled communication and relation within family generations (Bar-On 2006, 51), one can describe this state as people being surrounded by a "double wall", in which occasional openings on one side only meet the protective barrier that the other side has erected in response. Chronic violence and victimhood foster deadlocks or violence rather than transformation, and make attempts at dealing with the past collectively, as well as individually, extremely difficult.

"Understanding each others' narratives": In this context, there are few joint initiatives which can purport to be breaking through this deadlock in relations. One humble, realistically conceived and long-term strand of work concerns the development of school books presenting two historical narratives, one Palestinian, one Israeli.

The school book project in question (see for the following Adwan et al. 2012) was initiated by Sami Adwan, professor of education at Bethlehem University and co-director of the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East, together with his counterpart, the late Dan Bar-On, an Israeli psychologist dedicated to understanding and empowering people's working through their individual, trans-generational and collective understanding of victimhood and victimisation. The school book – which has meanwhile been banned from use in both Israeli and Palestinian schools despite earlier support by the educational authorities – presents, side by side, the histories as perceived on both sides. Its production demanded an intensive and personal process of the participating teachers over five years. The collection of the two histories in one volume, looking at each other across a gap, so to say, allows for a first step in "working through": that of seeing a fundamentally different account, and allowing it to stand: "in accepting that different interpretations of the past exist, and in seeking to understand the different versions and perspectives, societies can forge new identities and – at best, find empathy for the others' views" (Austin/ Fischer, ii). Only in a second or third step does a joint narrative even become conceivable, if it has the necessary champions, agents of change and holding environment. In a climate of ongoing violence and victimisation, this seems a long way off; which means that all that is possible needs to be done with even more conviction and perseverance.

Good practice: What stands out about dealing with the past work in this intractable context is the need to adopt a long-term view, the need for network building and network maintaining (often in the form of personal friendships) in the face of setbacks and re-kindled violence, as well as the need to set humble goals. What needs to be kept in mind, though, too, is that "in a war-torn environment, with a population that is constantly being traumatised and re-traumatised, people need not only basic services and physical security. They also need acknowledgement and understanding of their ongoing extreme psychological suffering, and of the complex survival mechanisms they have had to employ. In such contexts, dealing with trauma … needs to be understood as an element of every social interaction. Intervention strategies must be deep and broad. It is not a case of 'therapy here and security there', but of working to build relationships that acknowledge suffering and are able to deal with it not only in a therapist's clinic but also in schools, social gatherings, institutional settings and other everyday contexts." (Becker in Austin/Fischer 2016, 38.)

3.3 Georgia-Abkhazia: Intergenerational History Dialogues Across Borders – Reflective Engagement and scaling up

The legacy of armed conflict: The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, long suppressed by the policies of the Soviet Union, came to the fore with force in the early 1990s with competing claims over territory and political power (see, also for the following, Accord Insight 2016, 16; Zemskov-Zuege 2016, 52). In 1992-1993, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it culminated in a full scale war, which claimed thousands of lives and displaced nearly all of the ethnic Georgian population from Abkhazia. As a result, it has been attested that "for well over twenty years the two societies have been living almost entirely separate existences"

(Accord Insight 2016, 16). Minimal contact between Abkhazia and Georgia, and also between the groups in either territory, in a context of lingering conflict have lead to a wide-spread sense of isolation on the Abkhaz side, and a pronounced "blindness" to the suffering and experience of the other side in both societies. "Most of the younger generation … have no experience of interaction with the other, let alone coexistence" (ibid.). Increasing tensions between Russia and the West have also left its mark on the societies and political classes, with Abkhazia intensifying its bonds with Russia, while Georgia stresses its closeness to the West and Europe. This dimension to the conflict also gives it renewed virulence in the present.

In this atmosphere of mutual isolation, memories of the past have for the most part been invoked to support each side's (one-sided) view of history, in which the own suffering is magnified at the expense of empathy with the other side's suffering, should this even come into view. In Abkhazia, severe difficulties have been described to complete the process of mourning: it is "a small and very traditional society with a lot of social control. Nearly every single family is mourning war dead. … To this day, many mothers whose sons have fallen during the war still wear black and cover their heads with mourning scarves." (Zemskov-Zuege 2015, 25).

"How can working with the past pave new ways?": In the past decades of Georgian-Abkhaz peacebuilding work, dealing with the past has emerged "as a key conceptual space to address the legacies of violence that are such a barrier to a peaceful future" (Clogg et al. in Accord Insight 2016, 20). One example of such peacebuilding work has been carried out by Berghof Foundation's own Caucasus Programme team.[8] In a series of carefully prepared and facilitated encounters between members of different generations on either side (complemented by a South Ossetian part of the Triangle), personal experiences of the past and its violence were shared and discussed. A distinguishing feature of the approach is that it can rely on a group of trained local facilitators – galvanised during prior projects.[9] The organisers point to further principles of the work (Zemskov-Zuege in Austin/Fischer 2016, 28): a) it starts from within the groups in conflict; b) the process provides space for critical and negative feelings about dealing with the past or approaching 'the enemy'; c) the exchanges focus on concrete events and circumstances as well as concrete persons; d) the process is analytical; and finally, it aims at arriving at "cross-conflict line rituals". From small, more homogenous groups outward and upward, the project aims at strengthening critical self-reflection, increasing empathy and sharing between the groups in conflict, and finally scaling up the process by widening the circle of people who are being reached by the discussions through innovative formats (listening workshops with interview material from all sides, travelling exhibitions, new rituals) and mass-media communication (TV and radio). What makes the approach particularly impactful is the highly personal engagement it fosters with the way in which biographical stories and societal narratives are intervowen, in both harmony and dissent. Learning and challenging one's own perspective are rendered powerful and authentic by the fact that all sides tell their life stories, and are subsequently empowered to jointly share them with a wider set of key and more persons.

Good practice: The above example of a people-centred dealing with the past programme highlights the important role of narratives and open, self-reflective communication. It highlights a strong intergenerational dynamic in violent conflicts, in which the next generation works through the effects of the past in their own way. It also points to the role of rituals, and underlines that in order to support wider conflict transformation processes, it is necessary to scale up the message in due time (radio, TV, focal personalities). In this way, the past can become a "vital resource" for building future relations, if it is carefully handled.

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8 For more information, see www.berghof-foundation.org/programmes/caucasus/history-memory-and-identity/.
9 See www.berghof-foundation.org/programmes/caucasus/young-facilitators-group/.

4 Acknowledging Victimhood without Cementing a Victim Identity

The above case vignettes bring to our attention two main issues. On the one hand, they show that for the people living with a legacy of a violent past, an acknowledgement of this burden is of great importance. From supporting ex-prisoners and survivors of violence in Northern Ireland, through creating small openings in the inner walls surrounding Israelis and Palestinians amidst cyclical violence to creating awareness for the other sides' stories in societies in the Southern Caucasus, self-reflection, support and creating a safe holding environment are necessary 'ingredients' for any programme of dealing with the past in order to encourage understanding and acknowledgement.

In supporting such work, it is crucial to understand victimhood as a 'dual use' resource. On the one hand victimhood as a fixed orientation, a firm and exclusive identity has the potential to fuel conflict escalation and form an obstacle to processes of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Individual and collective experiences, narratives and coping mechanisms both play a role and their interplay needs to be carefully examined (e.g. Hamber in Austin/Fischer 2016.) The detrimental victimhood dynamic has stood out among the cases chosen above as it is collectively more prevalent. In a different locale to those above, the members of the Centre for Nonviolent Action[10] observe for the societies of the former Yugoslavia that one of the greatest obstacles for peacebuilding is a three-fold sense of victimisation in all societies (victimisation suffered by the enemy fought, by one's own politicians and by world powers). Problematically, "[the] role of the victim is one of the most comfortable ones, because it frees us from any kind of responsibility whatsoever: for our own destiny (because all of the levels stated above affect us), but also for the society we live in, too (because 'we know who's deciding our fate'). [...] There will be no substantial change in this region as long as we stay buried in the role of the victim." (Centre for Nonviolent Action 2007, 438). What is more, taking us back to Northern Ireland, is that: "In a society with a strong culture of victimhood, acts of violence are cast as retaliation and perpetrators of violence deploy their victim status to explain their acts of violence. Such a society is violence-prone, since violence is understandable – if not honourable – rather than shameful. The implications for political culture where victimhood becomes a socially institutionalised way of escaping guilt, shame or responsibility are far-reaching. A political culture, based on competing claims to victimhood will support and legitimise violence, and fail to foster political responsibility and maturity" (Smyth 2007, 80).

However, as the examples above show, such a culture of victimhood is not inevitable. Other initiatives demonstrate that suffering can also lead to forging a connection across the divide which is an inspirational resource in peacebuilding: take for example 1) the public engagements of Jo Berry and Patrick Magee who have found empathic ways of relating to each other[11] even after Magee had planted the IRA bomb which killed Berry's father at a Brighton hotel in 1984; 2) the Israeli Palestinian Parents' Circle of bereaved family members[12] speaking publicly about their grief and how it generates understanding of the crippling effects of violence regardless of the nationality of the victims; and finally 3) the grass-roots ritual of replacing mourning scarves with lighter patterns while still supporting the mothers in remembering their sons appropriately, initiated by the leader of an Abkhaz NGO, the Mothers of Abkhazia Movement for Peace and Social Justice.[13]

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10 www.nenasilje.org.
11 www.buildingbridgesforpeace.org/.
12 www.theparentscircle.com.
13 Zemskov-Zuege in Austin/Fischer 2016, 56.

In a strand of research which is a minority voice at the current stage, it is pointed out that "the psychology of victimhood need not inevitably become 'an energy-draining mechanism of individual and collective identity that hinders peacebuilding efforts and processes'" (Vollhardt 2009 citing Bar-On 2002, 109). Transformative interventions may help foster such an understanding of victimhood that does not focus on the exclusive uniqueness of one's own suffering, but rather take solace and agency from the shared experience of victimisation across groups. Such interventions include the mutual exposure to outgroups' victims narratives; intergroup contact (experiential learning) with other victim groups; and media-based learning around others' suffering (Vollhardt 2009, 145). These interventions require intimate knowledge, trust-building acknowledgement, a long-term presence and a creative and flexible repertoire, as should be apparent after the presentation of the above. In order to reach both key and more people, however, these seed initiatives will need champions and holding environments which allow them to grow and be noticed, to be taken up and to be respected. Whether we are talking about transitional justice, reconciliation or dealing with the past, these challenges remain the same.

5 Conclusion

This policy brief has taken its starting point in discussing three approaches to addressing the legacies of a violent political or social past: transitional justice, reconciliation and, proposed as the most generic term, dealing with the past. It has proposed that if rebuilding society and polity after war is fundamentally about creating new and better horizontal and vertical relationships, at individual and collective levels, then supporting people in coming to terms with their victimisation – either as victims or perpetrators or bystanders – has to be of central relevance.

Reviewing three examples of practice in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and Georgia-Abkhazia, it can be stated that good practice exists, but is frequently dwarfed by a more powerful discourse of victimhood as exclusive and violence-perpetuating. In a recent article in the New York Times, this phenomenon also has been described for the general climate of political debate in the USA: "...victimhood makes it more and more difficult for us to resolve political and social conflicts. The culture feeds a mentality that crowds out a necessary give and take — the very concept of good-faith disagreement — turning every policy difference into a pitched battle between good (us) and evil (them)." The author comes to the conclusion that "...victimhood culture makes for worse citizens — people who are less helpful, more entitled, and more selfish",[14] and suggests as symptoms of a politically dysfunctional culture of victimhood the suppression of free speech and a messianic type of leadership.

In sum, there are several dynamics of victimisation which can easily lead to a downward spiral of conflict escalation. They are:
1. Getting stuck (individually and collectively).
2. Competing for victim status and the acknowledge of greater/the greatest suffering.
3. Deducing a right to revenge and own (justified) violence.
4. Isolation, disconnect from diverse society rather than re-connection.
5. Parallel narratives without empathy or openness for (the) other narrative(s).

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14 Arthur C. Brooks, "The Real Victims of Victimhood", New York Times, 26 Dec 2015.

However, there are several approaches at our disposal to work on changing these dynamics towards allowing more constructive encounters, which are in the mid to long term more conducive to de-escalation and conflict transformation. They are, correspondingly to above elements:

1. To allow a frank discussion about one's experience – including the benefits and losses – with respectful people of one's in-group.
2. To offer other victimhood experiences – in personal and community detail – to learn, compare and contrast.
3. To encourage, in safe spaces, the meeting of different victim experiences, exposure to the consequences of perpetuated cycles of revenge, violence and isolation.
4. To encourage the re-discovery of more multi-facetted self-categorizations which transcend the victim identity and allow various re-connections.
5. To create alternative narratives and rituals and ensure that they have a channel into the decision-making top levels of society as well as a channel into the public opinion creating and mood-setting mass media.

At the end of the day, in complex settings with a long history of violence, it is important to stay committed to the task of dealing with the past for the long run, while adopting a humble and incremental approach – what Brandon Hamber calls "a 'good enough' approach" (Hamber in Austin/Fischer 2016, 18). Such an approach creates a stable and open space of acknowledgement, while filling it, at different levels and times, with varying measures which first and foremost should help people to re-establish trust and relationships, for themselves, their groups and communities and their institutions.

6 Recommendations for Practice-Supporting Policy

≡ Show principled governmental and institutional commitment over the long term (recognising the importance of dealing with the past, modelling dedication to dealing with the past, funding initiatives).

≡ Give priority to local grass-roots communities (individuals, families, groups) from the start, let local discussion take the lead.

≡ Combine small group and individual work (therapy of appropriate forms, physical or psychological, story-telling, meditation) with social and collective work (prosecution/justice, development/livelihoods, representation/political trust-building).

≡ Combine approaches and strategies to ensure that the psychological and the material, the political and the social, the private and the public are not de-linked.

≡ Start from pilot settings, building up from in-group discussions to allow for frank self-examination and expression of unpopular opinion; but grow from small to more, from bottom-up to middle-out.

≡ Give space to creative, experimental, flexible formats, tapping into the potential of arts, music, theatre, physical therapy.

≡ Allow different interpretations of the past to stand, as long as work towards recognising each others' difference is continued and respect for each others' experience is possible.

≡ Complement narratives of lament with narratives of hope and nurture as well as silence.

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