Victim Mobilisation: An antidote to denialism, a route to new relationships?

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If I am to summarise the key question being asked of me and put my spin on it, the question is: Can bottom-up civil society groups influence how political elites engage in peacebuilding initiatives in a way that improves rather than undermines intergroup relations?

I cannot address these issues at length in this short memo. Furthermore, I have chosen to focus on a specific subset of civil society in peacebuilding, namely those considered victims.[2] Typically, this includes individuals who have suffered gross violations linked to political contexts and struggles, such as the disappeared and their loved ones, those tortured, the families of the bereaved and those severely injured, among other categories.

I have chosen this group because my work explores the relationship between individual processes (victims, combatants, civilians) and political processes (peace processes, transitional justice mechanisms), particularly highlighting the gaps between the two. I have engaged with these questions in academic writing and as an active practitioner facilitating many inter-group dialogue processes, often with victims and combatants (see Verwoerd, Little and Hamber, 2020; Hamber, 2009).

Asking the above question from the perspective of victim groups also raises challenging questions seldom asked. Some of these are ethical and political. For example, are victim movements responsible for promoting positive group relations? Or should their focus be on justice with an eye to a future where social relationships and trust might be recast when accountability is delivered?

These big questions aside, what is certain is that victims are often active and key players in civil society in most peacebuilding contexts. We cannot consider inter-group relations in societies emerging from violence without considering the role of victims, particularly organised victims.

Such groupings often gather under the banner of being a "victims' group" with individuals identifying as victims or survivors.[3] Wider civil society groups and NGOs often support these groups. There are also now global victim networks.[4]

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[2] In this paper, I use the term "victim" mainly for clarity and because it communicates to the reader a position of diminished social power – a situation many of the arguments I put forward in this essay are trying to alter. I have chosen not to use the term "survivor", although it is more positive; it can also be a politically correct way of trying to circumvent difficult debates. That said, I equally do not want to undermine those who themselves identify as survivors, using the term victim not to undermine this but to raise the challenges faced by many who have suffered.

[3] Space also does not permit a discussion on victimhood itself and its complexity (for example, even here, I am privileging victims of political violence over victims of structural poverty), not to mention its permeable boundaries where the lines between victim and perpetrator can be blurred, and when and why individuals choose to identify as a victim or not.

[4] See INOVAS, the International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses at https://i-novas.org/.

Victim groups can play many functions, including, for example:

- A forum for joining together and recognising that others have had similar experiences and have common problems.
- A place for friendship, companionship and emotional support.
- A forum where first-hand experiences of support outside the group through other agencies can be shared and broader coping techniques exchanged.
- A safe place to recount events and break the cultures of silence that are common in conflict situations.
- A vehicle for social change and for lobbying and advocacy to get authorities to address their needs and those of other victims.
- A means of raising awareness about exclusion and the "forgotten victims" of a conflict.
- A networking forum about accessing resources, health care, support services, housing, employment and welfare benefits.
- A focal point for information exchange and personal education about the predicament in which victims sometimes find themselves with the idea that such education would prevent future atrocities.

If I think back to my own work with the Khulumani Victim Support Groups in South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Hamber, 2009), I learnt that in addition to psychosocial support, there was value for victims in their activism and that such actions were laden with symbolic meaning. Protests aimed at the TRC and Ministry of Justice were frequent over the years, and social action of this type, but now focused on a range of other issues (e.g. poverty, reparations, ordinary crime), continues to this day. The press was used to facilitate "speaking out". Several films, documentaries, and radio and television programmes were used for this purpose. Other civic participation events have also been used. These included, for example, healing ceremonies and public commemorations such as participation in International Day of the Disappeared. Group members were also involved in several community theatre projects, which toured locally and internationally – these were another vehicle for regaining voice and participation in the community, wider society and beyond.

Through these activities, most of which came from and were shaped by the victims themselves, I watched as some individuals were psychologically transformed through their participation. In this way, they moved beyond their victim identity through access to resources that were not only psychological in nature but also social, political, material and organisational (Wineman, 2003). Many psychosocial programmes in the development context have the same aim, that is, to rebuild social fabric through networking and cooperation while attempting to meet basic needs. Such social action and civic participation promote solidarity among survivors and increase empowerment and mastery over the environment.

Victim groups hold incredible symbolic power, particularly in societies moving out of conflict. We have seen in Northern Ireland how a single family who experienced loss talking of forgiveness can change the public narrative, or likewise, the push for justice can be seen as a hindrance to peace by some, yet for others, the bare minimum of what is needed to sustain peace. How such groups relate to one another and the state (do they participate in a truth commission, their level of social organisation and protest, if they foster inter-group contact) not only has personal ramifications for those involved from a psychosocial and legal perspective but arguably social and political implications too.

Although seldom the purpose, one could expect such actions to provide a powerful example to

political elites and others in society about what is possible regarding relational transformation. The moral power of victims should, and could, create pressure on elites to embrace a range of methods and ways of addressing inter-group relations. The most significant example is post-World War II Germany, where Holocaust survivors have wholly shaped the public and political discourse and subsequent political approaches to addressing the legacy of the genocide in Germany and elsewhere.

In other words, victims' voices, often amplified through community mobilisation, can challenge totalising, exclusive and top-down accounts of the past often linked with a particular ethnic or ideological position. This can open the door for new ways of talking about the past. Facing ongoing moral and social pressure, political elites are often forced to engage with alternative narratives or undertake initiatives that can impact relationships between groups (e.g. transitional justice processes, reparations, peace education). Victims' voices can become vital in creating and sustaining public debate that can (at least theoretically) impact society's belief systems.

As Dan Bar-Tal reminds us:

> Societal beliefs change through the process of negotiation, in which leaders, the intellectual elite, media sources, economic decision-makers, and other groups take part. The negotiation, which takes the form of public debate, may go on for years, until a new societal belief evolves (p.71).

The public debate is specifically forwarded and sustained through victim groups shaping the memory landscape. The demand for recognition through archives, museums, memorials, truth-telling and educational programmes can directly impact how the past is dealt with practically. I think of school children visiting museums created and lobbied for by victims' groups or the many education programmes that engage with historical violence to change the present (Hamber, Sevcenko, & Naidu, 2010).

Participation in specific transitional justice processes can increase local knowledge about violations, humanise those victimised and open the door to rebuilding social trust. Victims can connect with previously estranged groups and communities, e.g. through community dialogue work and storytelling. Victim groups and civil society can also be vital in monitoring progress made or if recommendations follow transitional justice processes such as truth commissions (Sprenkels, 2017), many of which can involve strategies for rebuilding relationships.

Victims as active and vocal citizens with a legitimate and ongoing social "voice" can also educate policymakers and society about their real needs and the impact of extreme political traumatisation. They can highlight what might be necessary to prevent future violence. It has been argued that victim participation increases the likelihood of non-repetition as victims can play a role in institutional changes (Correa, Guillerot, & Magarrell, 2009).

At the same time, thinking of victim groups in this way is not free from challenges. Some challenges include:

1. **Victim participation is a buzzword, not a reality**: Although there is a general universal commitment to the principle of victim-centredness in peacebuilding, full participation is often superficial (de Waardt & Weber, 2019). Victims are primarily still seen as "objects" with little power to influence the outcomes of specific mechanisms (Robins, 2017). As Impunity Watch has noted in numerous reports, there is a lack of

political will to involve victims in justice at a local and global level, with other policies given a higher priority. A cross-country study of victim participation in transitional justice mechanisms in Guatemala, Cambodia, Tunisia, Burundi, Honduras and Kenya showed the reality lagged behind the "mantra" of victim participation (Sprenkels, 2017). Genuine victim participation in peacebuilding contexts is yet to become a universal reality.

2. **The instrumentalisation of victims**: There remains a tendency for victims to be instrumentalised. Political elites can use victims to entrench their political position, using them as examples of the violence of their enemies and, in so doing, undermine inter-group relations. Likewise, Madlingozi (2010) talks of "transitional justice entrepreneurs" (meaning civil society) who speak on behalf of victims for their ends, often marginalising victims while claiming the opposite. McEvoy and McConnachie (2013) point out how prosecution lawyers appropriate the voices of victims for their own institutional and professional purposes.

3. **Peace silencing dissenting voices**: Peace can bring new silences. For many victims, mobilisation is not always about creating new inter-group relationships but rather a form of resistance and the antidote to denialism and injustice. Victims' voices that do not align with the dominant narratives to build inter-group contact or relationships can clash with ideas of political reconciliation. Demands for justice or a lack of perceived contrition to perpetrators by victims can result in them being dismissed, as anti-reconciliation and victims can be marginalised during peacebuilding processes (Hamber & Wilson, 2002).

4. **Victims are active agents with their political perspectives**. Victims have agency and are from, and part of, the social context. Victims are not homogenous groups at an inter- and intra-group level. Victims voicing the memories of the past, particularly when they involve violence, can also be partisan and intensify political division as much as opening new spaces for understanding and relationship building. For example, Klinkner and Schwandner-Sievers (2022) argue that in Kosovo, the dominant post-conflict memory of human rights violations at a local level has an uncomfortably ethnonational, partisan character. They further argue that transitional justice concepts such as non-repetition can be reinterpreted in adverse ethnonational terms, e.g., to prevent future atrocities, do not trust the Serbs.

Given these challenges, what can be done to support victim groups to challenge political elites and change inter-group relations?

At the heart of victim activism is the desire to have *their* struggles or those they represent find their way into a collective space and be shared rather than being hived off, suppressed, ignored or remaining only at the local level. In the desire for broader recognition, the possibility lies for mobilised victim groups to make a challenging contribution to rethinking inter-group relations.

Elizabeth Jelin's concept of "memory entrepreneurs" is helpful here (Jelin, 2003). For Jelin, "memory entrepreneurs", who can come from all ideological or political positions, are personally involved in "their project" and are defined by their actions that are social and collective (Jelin, 2003). To this end, their success (which I interpret to mean their ideas of the past are more widely accepted) relies on opening new spaces and projects, as Jelin notes, rather than relying on a narrow mechanical reproduction of past narratives. This involves a process of negotiation and a struggle, which over time creates a more wide-ranging and dynamic idea of the past despite "memory entrepreneurs" beginning the process of social engagement by

seeking "social recognition and political legitimacy of one (*their own*) interpretation or narrative of the past" (Jelin, 2003, my emphasis).

However, finding this space for this "negotiation" is tricky. The political distortion of victimhood can be relentless in peacebuilding contests, resulting in contrasting perspectives.

Victim groups who continue to fight for justice can eventually end up being challenged by elites from "both sides", even those who at first supported them ("their side"). This can become acute, especially when new peacebuilding priorities develop ("Let us build the future through prosperity by moving on", as is often heard in Northern Ireland). Furthermore, when victim groups (and so-called combatants) become the glue between previous antagonistic groups (or talk to so-called perpetrators) and begin to understand "both sides" and refuse to present a one-dimensional narrative, they can fall foul of claims of selling out or betrayal (Verwoerd et al., 2022).

Victim narratives can also be sanitised over time, often through playing to international audiences that necessitate simplifying past injustices to maintain funding sources (or to keep international visitors coming to post-conflict museum atrocities need to be recast in different ways). The international human rights world has increasingly become synonymous with sterile and abstract, liberal, international and institutional ways of framing political conflict where certain victim groups receive accolades and notoriety (especially those that show a reconciliatory spirit and speak English), and others are ignored as their truth remains to uncomfortable or complex to accept. Recent research with victim advocacy workers in Northern Ireland found that across the political spectrum, they all were frustrated by systematic delays when bringing legacy cases before the government (Braniff, Hamber, O'Rourke, McCready & Bell, 2021).

Therefore, thinking about how victim groups as part of civil society can challenge political elites or shape discourses is a messy business. Binaries between the bottom-up and top-down, local, national and global, the individual and the collective, do not capture what happens in so-called peacebuilding contexts.

The contested and political nature of mass atrocity (especially in deeply divided societies) creates a complex web of memory traces embodied in the lives of victims, state discourse, public attitudes, institutions, social networks and inter and intra-group relationships playing itself out in an ever-changing present. Social relationships are also often negatively altered by conflict or were non-existent in the first place. Victims, as civil society and the NGOs that work with them, cannot fix all of this, yet, simultaneously, are the heart of altering societal beliefs.

In this context, more deliberative strategies of consultation, participation, and victim engagement, not as an add-on in peacebuilding are a prerequisite to nurturing victim activism. Through such mobilisation we increase the chance of contested ideas being sustained and even clashing.

Victim groups have a special place in promoting social "negotiation", not as custodians of peace or the beacons of reconciled inter-group relationships, but instead as a voice of challenge and confrontation about past injustices. Embracing the challenge of victimhood opens the door for different interpretations of the past that can, through a range of processes, foster alternative interactions and challenges to the elite holders of power and redefine social and political relationships.

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