



FROM MEMORY to ACTION:

A Toolkit for Memorialization in Post-Conflict Societies



International Coalition of
SITES of CONSCIENCE

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Post-Conflict Societies

By Ereshnee Naidu
with contributions from Bix Gabriel and Mofidul Hoque

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FOREWORD

By Yasmin Sooka
Former Commissioner: South African Truth and Reconciliation
Commission and Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In all of our societies, we undertake memorial activities

to preserve the historical memory relating to traumatic events that have taken place: usually conflicts, genocide, famines, the plague, the aftermath of a great humanitarian crisis etc. In doing so, we are confronted with a number of crucial questions:

“What role does memory play in the framing of contemporary debates in our society? Should it necessarily play a role? What is the role and impact of Memorials in Social Reconstruction and Transitional Justice; how can these memorials advance reconciliation and social reconstruction among former enemies or how can we ensure that they do not have the effect of preserving and even strengthening the divisions that have led to violent conflict? What memories do we seek to preserve and how? In whose name do we act? How much memory is useful, particularly in cases of mass murder and genocide? How can we limit the manipulation of public memory by political actors for their own interests?”

Memory refers to the ways in which people construct a sense or meaning of the past, and how they relate that past to their present in the act of remembering. People may have lived personally through a given event or period, or they may be part of a collective body sharing a cultural knowledge base through transmission by others. In both cases, the sharing of an experience involves the existence and putting in motion of a cultural interpretive framework and developing meaningful language that enables us to conceptualize, think and express such experience. This perspective involves understanding memories as subjective processes anchored in experiences and in material and symbolic markers.

In dealing with the delicate balance of forgetting and remembering, most communities in post-conflict situations are affected by a number of factors: the legal and political, culture and morality and the ways in which memories are constructed and the narrative is landscaped. How communities define their relationship to the past is also closely linked to their belief system—life and death, right and wrong, good and evil, and innocence and culpability. Right and wrong are often blurred, evil becomes a tangible presence, and those who are culpable call themselves innocent. In this regard, it is important for those seeking the truth to take a step back as they reflect on the fact that the society was not only a victim of violence that profoundly affected it, but an author of the violence, as they were complicit in what happened or at the very least did not prevent it. In addition, the perpetrators often share a common living space with those they murdered or mutilated, they may have lived in or may still live in the same districts.

The passage of time enables victims and survivors to achieve perspective on a conflict and what they want to remember about it. Through memory we seek to promote a culture of democratization in part by creating a “never again” mentality. Depending heavily on cultural and other methods of educating and reminding people about the past, memorialization relies substantially on documentary evidence. Of course, the wider population must see the intervention as legitimate and impartial. For public memory processes, this means that the process of remembering and honoring is not just victors’ justice, but a thoughtful process of reflecting on the past. Second, any policy decisions or outcomes must be subject to a genuine consultation with those most affected by violence. For memory projects, this means that survivors must be directly involved in the discussion of what should be remembered and how and the projects should be accompanied by a range of other initiatives aimed at promoting the rule of law.

Many of the memorial sites that are Sites of Conscience have been turned into living spaces for peace education. The challenge for most societies is how to ensure that the younger generations, who did not live through the events being commemorated, incorporate or transform their significance.

In many instances victims are forgotten. In the desire to construct a state project, often the role of victims is ignored or is peripheral to the winners wishing to stamp their understanding of the past on the greater collective. We have seen this happen in many parts of the world and it is a lesson in how states often use people's experiences for their own triumphalism.

What does this mean for memory sites in the post-conflict world?

The process of framing memory must take into account our own cultures and our rich identity and it must seek to bring people together and not to divide. We need to construct sites which become sites for dialogue on contemporary issues taking the role of youth into account.

In commemorations, in the establishment of memory sites and in the recovery of archives, there is usually a political struggle between the forces that call for remembering and those calling for forgetting and oblivion. What is important is to build a space for dialogue. We face a challenge in using memory and our sites to build bridges between people but also to raise issues of social justice. When we construct sites we should also remember that this is when the conversation really begins.

The following manual does not claim to offer answers to many of these questions but by drawing on the work of Sites of Conscience, provides inspirational and innovative examples to deal with the challenges posed by some of these questions—examples that highlight the relevance of memory in the post-conflict world and ways in which societies can move from memory to action!