



# THE TRUTH FROM BELOW

– *Alternative Truth Seeking  
Experiences from Sweden,  
Colombia and Burma*

THE SWEDISH FOUNDATION  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

## INTRODUCTION

**THE SWEDISH FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (SFHR)** has worked with truth seeking to address human rights abuses in various forms since its inception. From past experience it can be noted that alternative truth seeking, or truth seeking from below, can be a powerful tool in pushing things forward in a country – materialising official truth seeking or the truth from above. Alternative truth seeking often refers to truth projects initiated by civil society or grass root actors to deal with the past of human rights violations. The purpose of this booklet is to address how alternative truth seeking can be undertaken and show its strengths and weaknesses. This is illustrated by alternative truth seeking processes in three different countries: Sweden, Colombia and Burma. The examples from Colombia and Burma are experiences from SFHR's partner organisations the Collective of attorneys José Alvear Restrepo and the Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma. The information presented in this booklet stems from SFHR's experience in the field as well as reports, books and scientific studies in the area of transitional justice and human rights.

The target group of this booklet is people working in the field of human rights and development – whether for authorities, for civil society organisations, for intergovernmental organisation or as decision makers.

Transitional justice “comprises the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation. These may include both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, with differing levels of international involvement (or none at all) and individual prosecutions, reparations, truth-seeking, institutional reform, vetting and dismissals, or a combination thereof.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the UN Secretary-General, *The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies*, S/2004/616, Security Council, 23 August 2004, para. 8.

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### Abbreviations

<b>AFAVIT</b>	Association of the Victims’ Relatives of Trujillo (Asociación de Familiares de las Víctimas de Trujillo)
<b>Cajar</b>	the Collective of Attorneys José Alvear Restrepo (Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo)
<b>ELN</b>	the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional)
<b>ND-Burma</b>	Network for Human Rights Documentation - Burma
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NHRI</b>	National Human Rights Institution
<b>NLD</b>	National League for Democracy
<b>REMHI</b>	the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (Proyecto de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica)
<b>SFHR</b>	The Swedish Foundation for Human Rights

## ALTERNATIVE TRUTH SEEKING - Description and Background

**ALTERNATIVE TRUTH SEEKING** often refers to truth projects initiated by civil society actors or grass roots actors where there is a lack of official initiatives to deal with the past of human rights abuses. Alternative truth projects do not only focus on trying to obtain redress for abuses but have important intrinsic values – there is a decisive healing power of the truth. Alternative and local truth seeking mushroomed in Latin America in the beginning of the 1980s and 90s, when civil society, academia and religious actors started to document human rights violations.<sup>1</sup> This is a traditional working method for human rights actors and perhaps not seen as something revolutionary, yet at this point techniques and the awareness of the importance of truth seeking and truth telling started to increase and develop.

As with official truth seeking – initiated or commissioned by the government or authorities – alternative truth seeking is just one component in the search for redress for injustices. To have a sustainable effect, truth seeking has to be complemented by trials, reparation programs, memorialisation projects and institutional reforms to avoid recurrence of future violations. Another similarity with official truth seeking is that beyond concentrating on summing up individual cases of abuse, the projects/commissions often try to establish patterns of the violations and understand the underlying reasons and incentives behind them. The reason for turning to alternative truth projects is in many cases that there is a lack of political will from decision makers to initiate official truth projects. Historically, official truth seeking initiatives have often taken the form of truth commissions. Truth commissions are non-legal, independent bodies set up temporarily by a country to uncover individual human rights violations and to identify patterns and contexts of violations in order to provide support for victims and to put forward proposals for how decision makers can prevent their recurrence. Most commonly, this is done by taking statements from victims and witnesses and subsequently presenting final reports with recommendations for state action.<sup>2</sup>

Alternative truth seeking has been influenced by the development of official truth commissions, where they sometimes take a similar form, through victims’ statements and the presentation of final reports with recommendations. In Brazil and Uruguay for instance, civil society produced own alternative truth commission reports, as political will and interest of the governments were lacking at the time. Both the Brazilian and the Uruguayan reports achieved national and international

attention – they even became bestsellers.<sup>3</sup>

There is an important interplay between alternative and official truth seeking initiatives, if one or the other lacks the support from the top respectively the bottom, it will be very hard or even impossible to bring about redress. Just because a truth commission is official it does not necessarily mean that it carries any public weight and just because an alternative truth project comes from civil society it does not mean that it is behest of influence. A key issue both in conducting the work and in regard to the legitimacy of the final result is the trust of the victims, their families and the society as a whole. Civil society has a privileged role in gaining that trust through close contact with the affected communities. Religious actors have played an important role in truth seeking projects. In Guatemala for instance, the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (Proyecto de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, REMHI) was led by the Catholic Church, and it was perceived as autonomous and impartial. The church was also present in large parts of the country and was able to have a close and confident contact with the affected communities.<sup>4</sup>

Official and alternative truth projects alike tend to focus on violations during a specific period in the past. The official ones often cover the situation of a country as a whole, while the alternative projects often focus on a particular part of the country or the population.

Alternative truth seeking can take many forms, they can for instance take the form of alternative truth commissions, documentation centres, mock trials, memorialisation efforts etc.

The interplay and interdependence between official and alternative truth seeking have been increasingly discussed and highlighted. In 2004, the UN Secretary General released his report on the rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies, stressing the importance of local ownership and national consultation processes.<sup>5</sup> This must be read as a response to critics claiming that there has been a focus on donor driven demands and a lack of local and national backing of the processes. The most recent report written by the UN Special Rapporteur on truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence is namely on national consultation and participation in transitional justice processes.<sup>6</sup>

## The Limitations of Alternative Truth Seeking

Despite the positive aspects of seeking the truth from below, this poses some important challenges compared to official truth projects. Alternative truth projects

have difficulties in reaching the important official recognition of past wrongdoings – the crucial state acknowledgment – and they have very limited or even non-existent possibilities to install reparation programs for the victims. Although local truth telling can have an important local legitimacy among the victims, they can seldom present an official truth sanctioned by the state with the necessary resources linked to the guarantee of redress and non-recurrence. What is more, after making abuses official there may be a need for a witness protection program to prevent further abuses, which will also represent a demand difficult to meet by the instigators of alternative truth projects.

Connected to the resource issue is the difficulty in reaching visibility. Visibility is needed to gain attention and support for the truth project in question. Another issue is representativity. As mentioned before alternative truth projects tend to focus on a particular community, group or region, whereas the official ones more commonly covers redress and reconciliation for the whole country, representing the needs of all citizens.

One of the main goals of truth seeking is to bring to light what was before unknown or unspoken of. Official truth projects have a privileged role in making public and creating public debate about the findings of the projects. The researcher and professional Louis Brickford has worked with and studied transitional justice processes extensively. He affirms that official truth seeking can make “a bigger stamp on history [...] Their narratives are more likely to make it into history books”.<sup>7</sup>

Concrete obstacles to alternative truth projects also include difficulties in accessing official records and obtaining contact with all the perpetrators from different combatant groups.

In their article on the participation of communities in transitional justice processes, the researchers Lundy and McGovern also warn against romanticising the alternative truth projects. Genuine local participation is complex to achieve, power relations can be reproduced and a hierarchy of victimhood can be installed. This can have negative effects on particularly vulnerable groups, such as women, children, ethnic minorities or persons with disabilities for instance.

## The Strengths of Alternative Truth Seeking

As well as limitations of alternative truth seeking, there are also important strengths to highlight. As mentioned before, legitimacy is key for any truth project. In some cases, civil society is perceived as more legitimate when telling the story

of past abuses than the government. The government's interest can be seen as vested and past perpetrators may still be in power and endanger the truth project's neutrality. Civil society may also have more experience in organising popular participation and has better contact with the affected communities, the victims and the survivors. Brickford puts forward the flexibility of alternative truth projects as their greatest strength, they are perceptive and responsive to the needs of the affected and to the local context.<sup>9</sup> Putting the victims and affected communities at the heart of the process is indispensable if one wants to solve conflicts, obtain redress and work for a sustainable peace. Which is something alternative truth seeking is particularly good at.


Another important strength is the way alternative truth projects can be precursors of official truth seeking, shining some light on untold stories. These projects make it harder for the state to deny the importance of dealing with the past. It can also have an empowering effect for victims and increase their role and impact on the political agenda of a country. This was the case in Peru where new grassroots movements emerged as a result of the victims' stories being told.<sup>10</sup>

Alternative truth projects have also had a tendency to be more creative in their design using culture, art and theatre as ways of expressing stories. These alternative means and methods can help avoid falling into one-size fits all solutions to truth telling.

Further, turning to civil society in truth telling can be a way of bypassing donor driven initiatives channelled through professionalised organisations often located in the capitals that have learned to respond to donors' priorities and demands. Donor driven initiatives are less likely to be sustainable after the donors leave and the project ends.

One example showing the strengths of alternative truth seeking is the Ardoyne commemoration project in Northern Ireland. Ardoyne is a Catholic community in North Belfast and the site of approximately 20 percent of the conflict-related deaths that occurred between 1969 and 1989.<sup>11</sup> A group from the community decided to make a book with testimonies of the victims. It has been questioned whether a truth project of this kind would have been possible at all if initiated outside the community. The project's results show an important restoration of dignity of the victims and the community. The people involved felt like "active participants rather than passive recipients of 'truth telling'".<sup>12</sup> The Ardoyne project also created an important mechanism for intra-community dispute resolution that managed to address issues perceived as taboo and created important dialogues around these issues.<sup>13</sup>

When pondering the strengths and weaknesses of alternative versus official truth seeking, it can be concluded that neither method is inherently supreme to the other. They can complement each other in important ways and also influence each other in tactics and methodology. For truth seeking to be complete it has to benefit from the legitimacy both from the top and the bottom.

In this booklet we will explore three different alternative truth seeking projects: The Church of Sweden's work to acknowledge their role in the repression of the indigenous Sami people, the Colombian community Trujillo's work for redress and memorialisation of the massacres and grave human rights abuses committed against members of their community, and lastly the Network for Human Rights Documentation - Burma and their work to systematise and publish cases of human rights violations in Burma/Myanmar. 

## Notes

- 1 International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), Fact Sheet on Unofficial or Local Truth-seeking Initiatives, 1 January 2009.
- 2 Brickford, Louis, Unofficial Truth Projects, *Human Rights Quarterly*, Issue 29 (2007) 994-1035, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1002-1003.
- 3 *Id.* p. 1009.
- 4 *Id.* p. 1010-1012.
- 5 Report of the UN Secretary-General, *supra* note 1.
- 6 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, A/71/40827, 71<sup>st</sup> session, UN General Assembly, 24 October 2016.
- 7 Brickford, *supra* note 2, p. 1032.
- 8 Lundy, Patricia & McGovern, Mark, The Role of Community in Participatory Transitional Justice, in *Transitional Justice from Below – Grassroots Activism and the Struggle for Change, Human Rights Law in Perspective*, edited by McEvoy, Kieran & McGregor, Lorna, Hart Publishing 2008, pp. 112-116.
- 9 Brickford, *supra* note 2, p. 1033-1035.
- 10 Cala Buendía, Felipe, Truth in the Time of Fear: Adiós, Ayacucho's Poetics of Memory and the Peruvian Transitional Justice Process, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Oxford Journals, (2012) 6 (2): 344-354.
- 11 Lundy & McGovern *supra* note 8, p. 113.
- 12 *Id.* p. 117.
- 13 *Id.* p. 118.

## ALTERNATIVE TRUTH SEEKING IN SWEDEN – The Church of Sweden and Violations of the Indigenous Sami People's rights

**THE SAMI PEOPLE** is an indigenous people living in the north of Europe. There are among 70 000 Sami living in four different countries: Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia.<sup>1</sup> The repression of the Sami in Sweden has taken various forms; denying them to exercise their religion and traditions, prohibiting the use of Sami names, legislating a divide between reindeer herding Sami and other Sami, compulsory separating Sami children from their families by putting them into nomadic schools, registrating and controlling the Samis with racial overtones, confiscating Sami human remains to mention a few. Some have categorised the repression as ethnocide<sup>2</sup> and the Church of Sweden has had a role in the commission of these violations. The Sami people has been treated like primitive creatures and dehumanised throughout history.

The Swedish state and the Church of Sweden have historically had a close connection. It was only in the year 2000 that the Church of Sweden was separated from the Swedish State. State policies have historically also in part been represented or carried out by the Church of Sweden. It was in many ways the institution that was responsible for the education and the social welfare at a local level. The Church of Sweden has thus a co-responsibility for the state repression of the Sami in Sweden.

*White paper about the relations between the Church of Sweden and the Sami people and the book on nomadic schools.*

Against the backdrop of the state's dark history in violating the Sami people's rights and the Church of Sweden's role in the repression, people within the Church of Sweden started talking about the need for truth seeking and reconciliation. In the 1990s, influenced by the international ecumenical work with reconciliation, the Church of Sweden started to look into its own history of the repression of the Sami in. In 1996, a national Sami council was created where Church services on reconciliation were held. An investigation was launched to look into Sami issues in the Church of Sweden and in 2006 the investigation declared that the Church of Sweden carries a historical responsibility for the repression of Sami people in

Sweden.<sup>3</sup> In 2007 the Secretariat of the Church of Sweden developed a set of principles on how the church should work to comply with the UN Declaration on Indigenous People's Rights.<sup>4</sup> In 2011 a hearing was held on Sami identity and church lives where demands for mapping and recognising the Church of Sweden's role in the violations of the Sami people's rights were voiced. An important conclusion from the hearing was that there was a need for research on the Church of Sweden's role and its implications for the treatment of the Sami historically.<sup>5</sup>

The decision was made to compile a scientific anthology on the relationship between the Church of Sweden and the Sami people. The anthology has also been called a *White Paper* but never a truth commission. Its creators perceived the book as a starting point for future truth and reconciliation processes.<sup>6</sup> As such, the anthology gives a comprehensive illustration of the relationship between the church and the Sami throughout history but it does not present recommendations for future action on how to deal with the past. The book is a product of a cooperation between the Church of Sweden and the academia and presents a collection of articles. The project's steering committee is mainly of Sami origin.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the White Paper a separate book on the nomadic school system was produced.<sup>8</sup> The book on the nomadic school system gathers the accounts of 10 Sami persons attending these schools. It is an important piece of history as there was a risk that these experiences would be forever forgotten since the persons who went to the nomadic schools are beginning to reach quite an old age.

The repression of the Sami has taken various forms and it is impossible to capture the whole extent of it in this short booklet. Only some of the violations documented in the Church of Sweden's anthology and its connected book on nomadic schools will thus be outlined in the following.

### *Repression of the Sami religion*

Historically within the Church of Sweden, the Sami religion has been considered inspired by the devil and incompatible with Christianity. The Sami holy leaders, the "näjd" where thought to be sorcerers. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of Sweden started their evangelisation of the traditional Sami territories in the north of Sweden coupled with repression of the Sami religion. During the late 17<sup>th</sup> century it became harder and harder for the Sami to practice their own religion. Sami were brought to court for what was called "religious crimes". The traditional Sami drum and chant "jojk" were banned. Samis were forced to present themselves in

church at particular sermons that were followed by inquiries. The church, through the hands of the priests, pillaged and profaned Sami religious places and items, which were often burnt. Priests considered these acts as a natural part of their mission in the evangelisation of the Sami. People who openly confronted the priests could be sentenced to death.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Erasing Sami names and their identities*

Throughout history the Church of Sweden has been in charge of registering people in the census. In the registration of Sami people, their names were not considered adequate and were replaced by Scandinavian names. Sami names have therefore not been registered, some have even been forgotten and a part of their cultural heritage thereby depleted.<sup>10</sup> As expressed in the anthology by Johannes Marainen:

“One of the most important things for a human being is his/her integrity and being recognized as an individual [...] The first sense of being an individual is that you get a name to listen to. It was therefore a shocking experience starting school when this name was not used, it felt like being renamed and the personal integrity was erased.”<sup>11</sup>

#### *The ‘true’ Sami and the nomadic schools*

The nomadic school is a sign of a somewhat two-sided attitude towards the Sami population. On the one hand the sedentary Sami were to be assimilated into the Swedish society and were not considered as Sami, while the reindeer herding Sami were acknowledged to be the *true* Sami. These *true* Sami were exoticized, treated as less worthy and had to be kept apart in order not to get extinguished. In the 1920s, it was established that children of reindeer herding Sami should go to nomadic schools adapted to their nomadic lives. Most of the teaching was carried out in tent-like buildings, “kåtor”. The children were separated from their parents for long periods of the school year and they often boarded in remote, isolated places. The teaching was conducted in Swedish and no Sami speaking was allowed. The children lived under harsh conditions, sleeping on beds made out of sticks in tent-like buildings during wintertime and with limited sanitary conditions. Teachers were tough, often resorting to physical punishments.

The quality of the education in the nomadic schools was substandard and some children lost their own language and culture in these schools. The Sami children that were not considered to be *true* Sami, went to ordinary schools where their

fellow students and even the teachers often subjected them to bullying.

The Church of Sweden was responsible for the whole schooling system up until 1917 when the Swedish state took over. Yet, even after 1917 the Church was supervising the nomadic schools.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Registration and control of Samis*

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century eugenic policies and ideologies became popular, where the wish to categorise and separate ethnic groups from each other grew stronger. The Sami people was considered as savage and in the need of cultivation and civilisation according to social darwinistic ideas.<sup>13</sup>

The policies of racial biology were the strongest in 1930 during the census of the Swedish population. The priests were the Swedish State’s main presence in the north of the country and made the collection of information and statistics of the ‘*Sami race*’ possible.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned before, the Sami population was perceived to be divided into two groups. The non-reindeer herding Samis and the sedentary Sami were not considered real Sami and had to be assimilated into the Swedish population. The nomadic reindeer herding Sami were the *true* Sami and had to be isolated from the rest of the population and *the civilisation*. The Swedish State was concerned with Sami mixing with the Aryan Swedish population. The priests were indispensable in mapping the Sami families in their areas of responsibility, they reported on what was considered as signs of ‘degeneration’ and ‘race-mixing’ such as psychologic illnesses and ‘hereditary defects’. The school and education system proved with time to be an ideal channel and platform for race-biologists to work through, without important objections. The Sami children were undressed and scrutinised in school often outside in freezing temperatures. Had it not been for the priests the mapping of the Sami people would have not been possible.

The information collected during the eugenic investigations included the following: name, profession, age, length, width and length of the skull, facial diameter and width, colour of hair, eyebrows and eyes. The personal character was judged as either good, less good, disorderly, drunken or irresponsible. Social capability was rated on the scale from able, well behaved, less well behaved or waster.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout history representatives of the Church of Sweden have in different ways participated in the collection of Sami human remains. In particular during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, large amounts of skeletal remains and skulls were pillaged from graves and graveyards. Despite Sami resistance and objections, the graves were plundered. The demand for Sami human remains was ever increasing from different institutions and researchers. Research that contributed to the idea that the Sami population was primitive and inferior, legitimising discrimination and social and cultural oppression.<sup>15</sup>

In 2007, the Sami Parliament, representing Sami interests and culture, demanded that the state made official the complete collection of Sami human remains under its control and that the remains were repatriated to the Sami people. Beyond the concrete right to the skeletal remains, this question addresses the Sami people's right to their own history. There have been a few cases of reburials, but the question still remains controversial.<sup>17</sup>

The role of the Church of Sweden is obvious in the plundering of Sami graves, both through individual priests' and church representatives' participation in the pillage and through the Church of Sweden's central role and position in society as a whole. Sami representatives have affirmed that it is crucial that both the Swedish State and the Church of Sweden apologise to the Sami population for the plundering of their human remains.<sup>18</sup>

All these different abuses put together make up a pattern of serious repression and denial of the Sami culture and traditions and their subsistence, which is sensed even today. The discrimination towards the Sami in Sweden takes many forms and is still influenced by old prejudices about the Sami character. The Sami can still be treated according to those stereotypes when dealing with different Swedish authorities.<sup>19</sup> Another example put forward both by the Sami Parliament and the Equality Ombudsman is that Sami people's right to free, prior and informed consent over matters that concern them - such as the exploitation of their traditional land - is not respected.<sup>20</sup> The exploitation of land and water threatens the Sami's livelihood; their culture, physical and mental health and can in the long run threaten their existence as a people. International and regional bodies have heavily criticised the failure to safeguard Sami people's rights.<sup>21</sup>

## Limitations

The anthology of articles on the relationship between the Sami and the Church and its connected book on nomadic shools, answers to demands from the Sami people in Sweden. Yet the Church of Sweden can only present one part of the picture, the state responsibility and acknowledgment are missing. The Sami Parliament has voiced demands of establishing a truth commission to investigate and remedy the historical discrimination and repression.<sup>22</sup> So far, the Swedish government has not heeded these demands.

The truth project addresses the Church's role in the repression of Samis, but it is difficult to separate which responsibility falls upon the church and the state respectively when the two entities were intertwined and the church was a part of the state. This can be perceived as a limitation and blurring the lines of responsibility. Historically, the church and its representatives had different roles; as decision makers, initiators, executives, advisors and in advocacy building. It is difficult to know if different repressive policies were instigated by the state or the church. Was it for instance a state or church decision to create a separate education system for the Sami? What is more, before the 17<sup>th</sup> century the church had a relatively weak national structure, it consisted instead of different, independent churches throughout the country, something that blurs the lines of responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

The important question of Sami human remains and their reburial is also out of direct impact of the church. The state first has to acknowledge this as a problem and second do something about it.

There has been some acknowledgment of the historic wrongdoings done to the Sami and the discrimination they are experiencing today. In 1998 for instance, the Swedish minister for agriculture apologised for the state's treatment of the Sami. This initiative has been seen as insufficient since it did not address the whole picture of repression nor did it address possible measures to palliate the situation.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, the Church's anthology and the book on the nomadic shool system are to be seen as a starting point in the truth seeking about historic repression and abuses of the Sami in Sweden. As has been seen with other alternative truth seeking projects - they can be precursors to official truth seeking. It is undeniably more difficult for the Swedish state to deny the history of past wrongs with the church's truth seeking putting violations in black and white.




## Strengths

The first most evident strength of the anthology is that it brings forward an important account of the history of repression of the Sami people in Sweden. The 33 articles summing up 1135 pages is a vital piece of Swedish history that has been put together as a starting point in understanding how extensive and structural the abuses were and how they interplay.

The Church's anthology and the book on nomadic schools represent a comprehensive effort to map the relationship between the Sami and the Church of Sweden, and who is in a better position doing this than the church itself? With its insights and access to internal information. The church has also a privileged relationship with Sami people that has participated in compiling the information in the anthology.

A somewhat paradoxical result of the church's repression of the Sami is that some Sami men and women have participated in developing the church's history from within as members of the church – such as contributing to the White Paper and the book on nomadic schools. Some representatives of the Church have also tried to ease the living conditions and the situation of the Samis.<sup>25</sup> The Church can thus contribute to a more nuanced picture of its role in the repression of the Sami. A concrete effect of the Church's truth project is that Sweden's archbishop is now publicly pushing for the state to create a truth- and reconciliation commission to look into the dark history of the repression of the Sami people in Sweden.<sup>26</sup> The archbishop's support is important for the Sami people's demand for redress since she represents an influential voice in debates on national politics and policies in Sweden.

Another advantage of the Church's truth project is that it has shed further light on the divide created between reindeer herding Sami and the sedentary Sami. This has been important since it remains in the Swedish State policies towards the Sami even today. Sami who are not herding reindeers have no access to land or water rights, while the Reindeer Grazing Act grants property and profession rights to reindeer herding Sami. This causes divisions within the Sami people in contravention of indigenous peoples' rights standards.

The Church of Sweden's truth seeking project can be used as an important tool for dealing with past abuses of the Sami in Sweden. What is more, it can also be seen as comprehensive background information in understanding the discrimination of the Sami that is still present in Swedish society today. At its best it can be used to redress the Sami and combat discrimination. Lastly, it can give the Swedish state an important push in initiating their own truth seeking to address their role in the repression of the Sami people. 

## Notes

- 1 *The Sami – an Indigenous People in Sweden*, a book co-produced by the Swedish Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs and the Swedish Sami Parliament, 2005, available at <http://www.samer.se/2137> accessed 2017-01-04.
- 2 Lindmark, Daniel & Sundström, Olle, *The Historical Relationship between the Church of Sweden and the Sami – a Scientific Anthology* ('De historiska relationerna mellan Svenska kyrkan och samerna – en vetenskaplig antologi'), Editorial Artos, 2015, p. 51.
- 3 *Id.* pp. 21-22.
- 4 *Id.* p. 72.
- 5 *Id.* pp. 68-73.
- 6 *Id.* pp. 11-12.
- 7 *Id.* pp. 28-30.
- 8 See subtitle *The 'true' Sami and the nomadic schools below* for more information.
- 9 *Id.* pp. 629-652.
- 10 *Id.* pp. 797-806.
- 11 *Id.* p. 806.
- 12 Church of Sweden, *When I was eight years old, I left home and I haven't gone back yet, "The Nomadic Schools Book"*, ('När jag var åtta år lämnade jag mitt hem och har ännu inte kommit tillbaka'), Verbum, 2016, can be ordered at <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/nomadskolan-forttryckte-samer> accessed 2017-01-04.
- 13 *Id.* pp. 900-907.
- 14 Lindmark, Daniel & Sundström, Olle, *supra* note 2, p. 920.
- 15 *Id.* pp. 961-988.
- 16 *Id.* pp. 993-1021.
- 17 *Id.* pp. 994, 1006-1008.
- 18 *Id.* pp. 1019-1021.
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## ALTERNATIVE TRUTH SEEKING IN COLOMBIA

### – The Trujillo Massacres and the Victims' Struggle for Truth

**MANY PEOPLE** have fallen victim to the over half a century long armed conflict in Colombia. The conflict has led to more than 220 000 people being killed, thousands of cases of enforced disappearances and kidnappings, sexual crimes and gender-based violence, forced recruitment of minors and the displacement of over six million people.<sup>1</sup> Many official initiatives of truth seeking, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence have been carried out throughout the years – not least with the peace agreement made between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla that was approved by the Colombian congress 30 November 2016. The official truth seeking has often been accompanied, complemented or preceded by alternative truth projects – one of which is presented below.

Trujillo is a municipality in the western parts of Colombia that has lived through numerous massacres and attacks throughout the years. Between 1988 and 1994 the municipalities of Trujillo, Bolívar and Riofrío were subjected to a series of massacres that produced 342 victims of murder, torture and forced disappearances.<sup>2</sup> The crimes were committed by various actors and can be said to be emblematic for the complex Colombian conflict schemes – an illegal armed group, in this case the ELN guerrilla (the National Liberation Army, Ejército de Liberación Nacional), drug traffickers, state security forces such as the police and the army and paramilitaries. The massacres are distinguished by the particular cruelty – chain saws were used on the victims when still alive and salt were pored in open wounds for instance. The torture methods seemed to be inspired by the ones used by the dictatorships in the countries of the Southern Cone of Latin America during the 1970s and 80s.<sup>3</sup>

To be able to deal with the abuses and the continuous threats that the communities live under still today, the surviving victims and the victims' families created various organisations and activities. One example is the Association of the Victims' Relatives of Trujillo, AFAVIT (Asociación de Familiares de las Víctimas de Trujillo). To delimit the work, we will concentrate on AFAVIT but other organisations will also be mentioned. One can say that AFAVIT in itself is an alternative truth project, but the association also has impeded, initiated and carried out numerous truth seeking initiatives. One important characteristic of AFAVIT's work is that

the women have been important instigators and leaders representing the organisation and publicly denouncing the violations.<sup>4</sup> Beyond demanding justice for the crimes committed, they have presented claims for social and local development for a comprehensive redress and guarantees of non-recurrence. The communities have also included children and youth affected by the massacres in the work. To facilitate their participation they have used strategies involving culture and play. Religion has also been an important tool in the communities' mourning and has been central since one of the murdered community leaders was a priest – Tiberio Fernández Mafla.<sup>5</sup>

There are conflicting views on how many people have fallen victim to the massacres. AFAVIT claims that the number amounts to 342. This number has not been recognized by the state that in April 2016 recognized 76 victims of the massacres of Trujillo.<sup>6</sup> The absolute majority of the direct victims were men: 91, 4%.<sup>7</sup> The reasons why various armed actors attacked the communities in Trujillo are manifold and this is also why their vulnerability is so multiplex. The leftist guerrilla, ELN, saw the members of the communities as obstacles to their expansion of power and control in the region. The drug traffickers and paramilitaries also wanted to secure their presence in the area and protect their cocaine laboratories and smuggle routes. Some state security forces thought that the community was siding with leftist guerrillas, in particular the ELN, and was planning to overthrow the regime. The state security forces thought that counterinsurgency methods were needed but used very unconventional methods such as: social cleansing, elimination of witnesses, dispossession of land and political persecution for instance.<sup>8</sup> A large proportion of the abuses were committed by unholy alliances between drug traffickers and state forces. This number has been estimated to represent between 30–40 per cent of the cases that have been clarified.<sup>9</sup>

The abuses peaked in 1990 with 98 victims,<sup>10</sup> and have been said to have come to an end in 1994. Yet the violence continues and the victims claim that there has not been a formal end of the massacres – in 2000 and in 2001 the levels of violence peaked again. In 2014, new cases of persecution such as attempted murders, vandalising the memorialisation sites and death threats were reported by AFAVIT.<sup>11</sup> The basis of the communities' vulnerability is no longer to the same extent political persecution. New conflict dynamics have arisen mainly connected to actors involved in drug trafficking that threaten the communities who are trying to preserve the memories from the Trujillo massacres.<sup>12</sup>

When AFAVIT did not succeed in their efforts to get official recognition from

the state and had exhausted all national remedies, they decided to take the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, supported by the Collective of attorneys José Alvear Restrepo (Cajar).<sup>13</sup> In the process before the Commission, the Colombian state suggested that the parties would agree on a friendly settlement including the creation of a Commission of inquiry<sup>14</sup> which AFAVIT agreed to. After the publication of the Commission's final report in 1995, the then Colombian President Samper officially recognised the state's responsibility in this tragedy.<sup>15</sup> It was recognised that a temporary alliance between drug traffickers and local and regional army and police had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. Among other elements of reparation, the Colombian state formulated a social investment plan as a result of the Commission's recommendations. In 1995, AFAVIT also obtained their legal status as a non-governmental organisation and in addition to their previous work started to monitor how the state complied with the Inter-American Commission's recommendations.

AFAVIT has initiated multiple activities in order to safeguard the memory of the massacres and dignify the victims and their families. They created a memory park (*El Parque Monumento*) divided into four parts: one part where the stories of the massacre are displayed, one part where some of the victims are buried, one part with a space for memorialisation with a wall and a shrine and lastly a permanent memorial exhibition with a library.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the years, culture has been an important vehicle for memory and activities in the communities using among other methods theatre and painting.

Different opinions have emerged on how the memory of the massacres is best preserved. AFAVIT has been criticised because they have focused on the communities' mourning, organising marches, commemorations and pilgrimages; working with the memory park and claiming economic reparations for the abuses endured. Other actors, such as the youth organisation Orden Perdida and the Intercongregational Commission of Justice and Peace wanted to open up for more contact with other sectors of society on a local, regional and national level and also work more closely with the Catholic Church.<sup>17</sup> Despite the critique, one of AFAVIT's priorities – the memory park – has proved to be the initiative that gathers the most consensus among the organisations and the survivors.<sup>18</sup> As put by the nun and leader, Maritze Trigos, the park “is a denunciation, (...) a cry for justice, it is a permanent complaint”.<sup>19</sup> Since the construction of the memory park in 2001, it has been attacked and vandalised several times and it continues to receive attacks. Leaders, victims and witnesses have been forced to leave Trujillo after receiving death threats; some have even been forced to go into exile.<sup>20</sup>

Despite state recognition of the massacres and announced investments and reparations, the communities have not been repaired and a big number of internally displaced people from Trujillo have not been able to return.<sup>12</sup> The situation has been denounced by AFAVIT and brought to the attention of the Inter-American Commission. During its 157<sup>th</sup> session in April 2016 the Commission brought up the Case of Trujillo again. An updated friendly settlement between the victims and the Colombian state was expanded to include new victims from the attacks committed 1988-1991 increasing from 34 victims to 76. The settlement also establishes that the Colombian state shall appoint a special working group with the task to investigate the massacres with a special focus on the forcibly disappeared. The state shall organise a commemorative act headed by a high state official, something that was concretised when the Minister of Justice officially apologised to the victims, their families and the communities in April 2016. The state shall also produce a documentary on the victims' search for justice and memory, provide financial support to the memory park and other memorialisation events conducted by AFAVIT. They shall repair the victims for the material and immaterial damages that they have suffered. Last, the state shall create an action plan for preventing future human rights and humanitarian law violations in the municipality of Trujillo.<sup>22</sup> AFAVIT will continue to monitor the state's compliance with the new recommendations.

## Limitations

As all alternative truth projects, an evident limitation at first in the case of the massacres of Trujillo is the lack of official recognition of the facts and a lack of resources to carry out the work and to help the victims. Even after the state recognition of the massacres and its responsibility for these, the communities continue to suffer from threats and pillages of their projects and monuments. The continuous presence of armed actors that perceive the communities' work as a work of resistance against them makes the victims' and civilians' lives difficult to lead in peace in Trujillo. Not only do the communities have to deal with past abuses, mourning and recovering the memory of the massacres, they have to endure unceasing threats to their lives in doing so – adding new abuses and important new memorialisation work in an unfortunate vicious circle.

Despite state recognition and adopted plans of integral reparation and social investments, the implementation of these initiatives is low. Many of the recognition and investment plans have proved to be empty words. It is hard to establish

the reason for this – whether it is because of the difficult security situation in the country with the presence of armed groups making it impossible to operationalise the initiatives or whether there is a lack of political will.

Another aspect adding on to the already complicated situation is the widespread and systematic violence that reigns in Colombia – after more than half a century of armed conflict, violence has in many senses become institutionalised. In such a situation, with massive human rights and humanitarian law violations occurring throughout the country, it can be hard to get attention and resources – the Trujillo massacres are unfortunately mere details in Colombia’s violent past.


## Strengths

Despite the somewhat dark picture painted in the previous section, there have been significant victories and advantages of the alternative truth seeking in Trujillo. After and during the massacres there have been many different entities involved in constructing a common history and memory around what happened in Trujillo: AFAVIT, the Catholic Church, the Intercongregational Commission of Justice and Peace, the youth organisation “La Orden Perdida” and the victims. One important, if not the most important, result of the alternative truth seeking of these actors is that it pushed for an official truth project to clarify what really happened in Trujillo – the Commission of Investigation of the Violent Events of Trujillo (Comisión de Investigación de los Sucesos Violentos de Trujillo). Subsequently after many years of struggle on behalf of the various groups the state recognised its responsibility in the massacres.<sup>23</sup> Had it not been for the work of the victims, their families and the communities, state recognition would have been highly unlikely to achieve. The truth projects from below pushed the case through the national system to the regional human rights protection system, achieving recognition for their bloody history, reaching a friendly settlement with the state and finally state acceptance of their responsibility. The recognition of state responsibility has obligated the government to invest in reparation plans to the communities. Their work can and has served as a precursor for alternative truth seeking both nationally and internationally.

The truth monuments, mourning, activities and so forth have in themselves served as important acts of memorialisation and reparation. Something that has helped to ease the burden for the victims.

Another important aspect that stands out from Trujillo is the role of the women in the memorialisation work. Their experiences have been highlighted not

only as direct victims of the massacres but also indirect victims as family members of victims and last but not least as keepers of their own memories. Indirect victims tend to be forgotten after conflict and violations and women are often overrepresented in this category of people. Their realities, vulnerability and the abuses against them have therefore become invisible. It is thus important to make women’s roles in the truth seeking in Trujillo visible.

The memories of Trujillo are still alive in the hearts and minds of the victims and there is still a long way to go to achieve integral reparation. Yet, the memorialisation work carried out from below has helped the victims to deal with these stories and pushed the state to recognise the massacres and achieve reparation and redress. 

## Notes

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- 4 *Id.* Part II, Chapter 3.
- 5 *Id.* p. 23-24.
- 6 Inter-American Commission, Report No. 68/16. Case 11.007. Friendly Settlement. Trujillo Massacre. Colombia. 30 November 2016, p. 5.
- 7 The Trujillo Massacre, *supra* note 2, p. 41.
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- 16 *Id.* pp. 181-184.
- 17 *Id.* pp. 194-195.
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- 19 *Ibid.* Conversation with Maritze Trigos, CESO, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, 1 April 2008, freely translated from Spanish: “Por eso es que el Parque Monumento incommoda, porque es una denuncia, porque es un grito de justicia, es una denuncia permanente”.
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- 23 The Trujillo Massacre, *supra* note 2, pp. 156-160.

## ALTERNATIVE TRUTH SEEKING IN BURMA – Documenting Human Rights Abuses – ND Burma

**SINCE** 1962 Burma/Myanmar (hereinafter Burma will be used) has lived under military dictatorship marked by civil wars and ethnic conflicts. As in Colombia, the nature of the conflicts in Burma is complex. There are many different armed actors involved, such as the state security forces and a panoply of ethnic armed organisations, often responding to minorities' interests from different regions of the country. There are also important economic interests involved in the conflicts related to natural resources and drug trafficking. Several decades of internal strife have led to massive human rights violations by all armed actors involved, as well as a refugee crisis with both internally displaced people and people fleeing from Burma, the majority with Thailand as their end destination.

There have been several attempts to initiate peace talks in Burma. The latest and most comprehensive one started in 2010, coinciding with the beginning of a transition from military rule to a civilian-military government. Yet the armed conflicts persist and human rights violations are commonplace.<sup>1</sup> There are several initiatives of alternative truth seeking from the Burmese civil society. In this booklet we will concentrate on the example of The Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma (ND-Burma) – an umbrella organisation working to document human rights abuses with a focus on regions where ethnic conflicts are frequent. The transition towards democratic governance is still very young and there is a tendency of both Burmese actors and some international actors to focus on reconciliation – truthseeking, redress and reparation have not proven to be a high priority.<sup>2</sup> Yet these components of transitional justice are indispensable to obtain a solid transition to peace and democracy. This is why ND-Burma's truth seeking is particularly important in constructing and retrieving the (hi)story of vulnerable communities affected by the conflicts and hopefully contributing to a transitional justice process in the future. Since the transition in Burma is in its first years, it is difficult to see the results of ND-Burma's truth seeking today and their potential to influence the government. This is why this section of the booklet will focus mainly on ND-Burma's work and methods in conducting their truth seeking.

ND-Burma was founded in 2004 in order to provide a way for Burmese human rights organisations to collaborate on documentation of human rights abuses.<sup>3</sup> Today, ND-Burma has 12 member organisations and seek to use their data to

influence policies and prepare for a transitional justice process and stable peace in the country. ND-Burma conduct fieldwork training, coordinates members' data in a shared database, issues periodic human rights reports and engages in joint advocacy campaigns.

Their periodic human rights report published in August 2016 shows an escalation of killings and torture in the first six months of 2016; 15 killings and 40 cases of torture were documented by ND-Burma between January and June 2016 compared to the 11 killings and 26 torture cases documented during all of 2015. Politically motivated arrests and detentions have ensued and large-scale internal displacement have followed as a result of the rise in conflict.<sup>4</sup> The network also produce thematic reports to inform policy makers and the government about the situation on the ground, especially in active conflict areas. For instance, two reports published in November 2016 highlight the use of rape as a weapon of war – often with complete impunity,<sup>5</sup> and also the challenges associated with repatriation of Burmese refugees.<sup>6</sup> In December 2016 another report was published highlighting the situation for internally displaced persons' who live in camps without access to humanitarian assistance and food due to the Burmese army's blocking of aid.<sup>7</sup>

The documentations consist mostly of interviews with survivors of human rights abuses, both from first hand sources (the survivors themselves) and from second-hand sources (the survivors' family and friends). ND-Burma do not limit what kind of violations they collect data on, they document all different kinds of violations that they have been made aware of. However, the range of human rights violations in Burma is extensive, and each ND-Burma member organisation focus on certain violations that are particularly relevant to their areas of work.<sup>8</sup> The cases sometimes reveal a vulnerability of specific groups – such as women and children.

ND-Burma conduct discussions and trainings within conflict affected communities to raise awareness about violations and how to try to access justice. They also organise truth telling events for the victims and their families to provide the opportunity to share their experiences with the public, who often has limited knowledge about the abuses. The events include the sharing of experiences and the exploration of ways to claim accountability.<sup>9</sup> The military is generally not lenient towards human rights documentation and the persons carrying out the documentation must be careful not to bring phones and other technical equipment, or photos of a certain nature, through the checkpoints. One experience is that women face a lower risk to their own personal safety and that it therefore, in certain ways, is easier for them to document human rights abuses. This is thought to be a result

of a general underestimation of women and their abilities.<sup>10</sup>

ND-Burma also use the momentum of international celebrations such as the International Peace Day to organise truth-telling events, to provide an opportunity for victims and their family members to share their experiences with others. After the activities, the participants often express relief. Listening to other victims' experiences enables them to feel comfort and support in the fact that they are not alone in their suffering. ND-Burma's aim is that the participants in these kinds of activities will continue to increase and that eventually the authorities will create a program for victims containing truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence.<sup>11</sup>

For some of ND-Burma's member organisations, the process of documenting starts with the training of the persons carrying out the documenting. One organisation residing in the Kachin state also hosts an internship program with students from within Burma who have an interest in human rights documentation. The six-month internship provides the students with awareness and training in human rights and human rights documentation, the UN-system and discussions on why documenting human rights abuses is an important part of the peace process. The interns then travel to other members of ND-Burma to take part in their work and learn the practical parts of documenting. Some of the interns are then recruited to the organisation.

The trust-requisite is a crucial aspect in the documentation process. Building a trusting relationship between the person documenting and the interviewee can be challenging. Sometimes, the interviewee is already familiar with human rights documentations and is willing to participate at once. If this is not the case, the documenter need to establish a trusting relationship with the interviewee and the family and friends of the interviewee. This process could take several months and include several meetings. At the first meeting, the documenter explains the objectives of the documentation. This is a way of motivating the interviewee to take part in a larger movement for the promotion of human rights in the country. Many of the victims of human rights abuses then feel motivated to share their story. The interviewees only give interviews if they are comfortable enough. If they are not ready to talk about their experiences, the documenter will try to approach the family and friends of the victim, to get the story from the second-hand source.<sup>12</sup>

One important part of the documentation is the networking between the members of ND-Burma. This involves training and the sharing of information as well as empowerment and awareness raising of all the members. It enables the

whole network to be vigilant regarding abuses: when there is an ongoing violation, the member organisation closest to the area can call on other member organisations to send documenters right away. This is largely how the organisations gathers interviewees for their documentation. Sometimes, individuals approach one of the member organisations, wanting to be interviewed. This is, however, rather rare. For instance, in the Kachin area, the network's presence is now so widespread that there is rarely a violation occurring that the local member organisation are not already informed of - thus having already sent personnel to do interviews.<sup>13</sup>

## Limitations

The most evident limitation of ND-Burma's truth seeking is the unwillingness of the government to acknowledge the need for justice to establish sustainable peace and a successful transition. The rest of this section will address more practical obstacles for ND-Burma to carry out their work.

One aim of ND-Burma is to expand both their geographical and thematic areas and cover a wider spectrum of human rights abuses. At the moment, some regions in Burma cannot be reached, for example the Kayah state and parts of the Shan state. If ND-Burma's geographical cover was wider, they would be able to cover human rights issues occurring in the entire country.

In 2011, Burma began to open up after the rule of the military regime and many of the member organisations which had been operating from locations in Thailand, tried to re-settle in their areas of origin in Burma. This has been a very time- and resource consuming process, which has led to a temporary decline in the collaborative capabilities between the members.

In Burma, it is difficult for non-governmental organisations (NGO's) to obtain legal status as NGO's due to laws such as the Unlawful Association Act and Peaceful Assembly Act. Since the National League for Democracy (NLD) took office, this has improved slightly with a few of the NGO's obtaining registration status. Many of ND-Burma's member organisations still operate without a proper legal registration in Burma, meaning that their work is carried out unofficially. The institutional office of ND-Burma is currently working on obtaining legal status as an NGO. Another improvement since the NLD-led government took office is a slight opening to engage with representatives of the government and parliament about the mechanisms of transitional justice.

Difficulties remain however - many of the military officers are themselves perpetrators of human rights violations and the military is still enshrined in the

governmental apparatus. The 2008 Constitution guarantees the representation of the military; in the parliament by 25 % meaning for example that the constitution could not be changed without their consent. In addition several of the important ministry positions are also reserved for the military.<sup>14</sup>

Burma is currently in a state of conflict. This, of course, means that the documenting personnel are affected by all the safety threats associated with conflict. They also receive threats of physical violence – the severity of these threats are however very dependent on the standpoint of the local authorities. In other words – the security situation of the documenters is arbitrarily dependent on the local authorities' personal views of their work.<sup>15</sup> The lack of legal NGO status for several of the member organisations are also increasing the existing security risks, since the risk of being shut down by the government is considerably higher without a legal ground to stand on.<sup>16</sup>

A practical challenge the documenters face in their work is poor mobile connection, resulting in difficulties in contacting each other, but also in uploading the data collected from the interviews.<sup>17</sup>

Looking forward, the biggest challenge for ND-Burma in the future will be to include their truth seeking into the national peace process and transition. There is also a need to create a new national human rights institution (NHRI), or to reform the existing one, to make it independent and to comply with the Paris principles relating to the functioning of NHRI's adopted by the UN General Assembly.<sup>18</sup> This would help support ND-Burma's work by legitimising human rights law nationally and increase the possibilities to obtain justice for abuses.<sup>19</sup>

## Strengths


Documenting human rights abuses as an alternative truth seeking method has important advantages and different levels of impact. There are those that almost immediately affect individuals and organisations and those that are calculated to have effect on the overall peace process in the future. Furthermore, some of the impacts will have a long-term effect on national policymaking and/or the international community.

The immediate effect for survivors of human rights abuses becomes apparent during the interview process – having somebody listening to their story and knowing that they are a part of a bigger movement to ensure justice and peace has a remedial influence on the interviewees and the local communities. It empowers the survivors of human rights abuses and the different member organisations.

ND-Burma's work proves that it is possible for non-governmental actors to initiate truth initiatives and documentation of this sort. Both members and non-members of the network in Burma have increased their capacity in these fields. Furthermore, both members and non-members of the network have acknowledged the importance of documenting human rights abuses. The demand for training by ND-Burma, and interest to join the network, is increasing – resulting in a stronger, more effective, dialogue with policy makers to further advocate the human rights situation, to work towards amending oppressive laws and to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders.<sup>20</sup>

The data collected from the interviews also provides a basis to raise awareness about the human rights situation in Burma – on a national level as well as towards the international community. It will also provide a substantial foundation for the future peace process and transition – for example it would simplify the process of creating an official truth commission and might help in bringing some of the perpetrators of violence to justice in court. The work of ND-Burma puts pressure on the government and makes it harder for officials to ignore the violations occurring.<sup>21</sup> The fact that ND-Burma have systematised the collected data will also make it easier to use it in the future, be it by a National Human Rights Institution, a truth commission or similar.

The attention from the international community will also result in a safer environment for the Burmese human rights defenders. The fact that important actors outside of Burma is keeping a watchful eye on the development and the treatment of human rights defenders is of fundamental value to their safety.

One of the strongest weapons of the documentation of human rights abuses in Burma is the empowerment it provides to so many of the local individuals and organisations. It changes them from passive to active parties with ability and possibility to influence their own lives. Not to mention that the data will be an invaluable tool in the future to further understand the conflict and help prevent recurrences.<sup>22</sup> 

## Notes

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- 22 *Ibid.*

## CONCLUSION

**AS WITH** official truth seeking – initiated or commissioned by the government or authorities – alternative truth seeking is just one component in the search for redress for injustices. To have a sustainable effect, they have to be complemented by trials, reparation programs, memorialisation projects and institutional reforms to avoid recurrence of violations.

A key issue both when conducting the work and regarding the legitimacy of the final result is the trust of the victims, their families and society as a whole. Civil society has a privileged role in gaining that trust through close contact with the affected communities.

One of the most important limitations is that state responsibility and acknowledgment of the wrongdoings is missing in alternative truth seeking. However, alternative truth projects can be precursors of official truth seeking, shining the light on untold stories. This was seen in the Colombian example and hopefully it can happen in the future, both regarding the Swedish state's recognition of their responsibility in repressing the Sami people and the Burmese government's acknowledgment of the importance of truth seeking and addressing human rights abuses to obtain a sustainable transition. For the truth seeking to be complete it has to benefit from the legitimacy both from the top and the bottom.

Putting the victims and affected communities at the heart of the process is indispensable if one wants to solve conflicts, obtain redress and work for a sustainable peace. Which is something alternative truth seeking is particularly good at.



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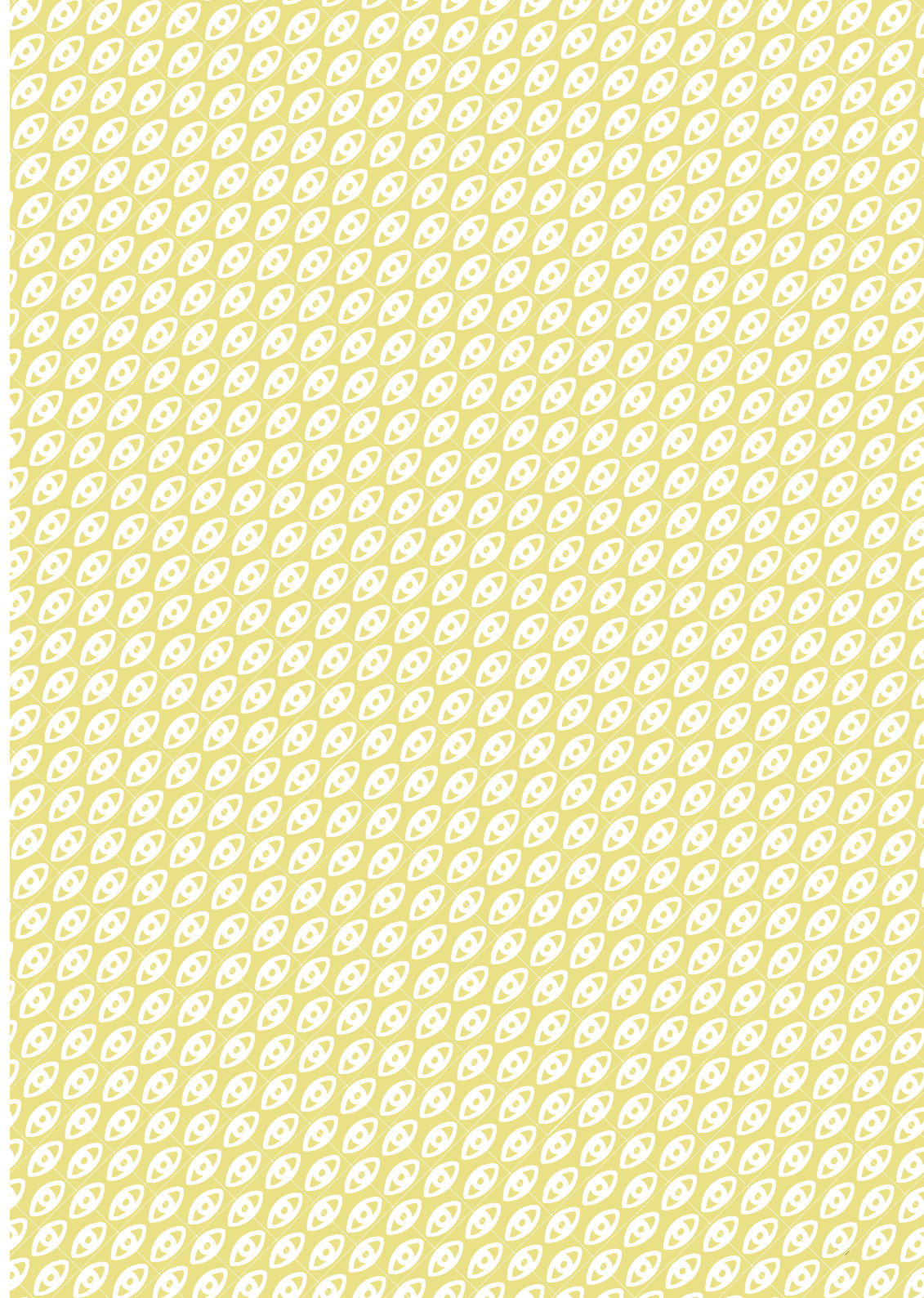
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Where there is a lack of official initiatives to deal with past human right abuses, civil society actors sometimes initiate their own truth seeking projects. These projects are often referred to as alternative truth seeking and developed largely in Latin America in the 1980s and 90s.

Today, the techniques of truth seeking and truth telling continue to develop and awareness of the importance of these activities are increasing. In this booklet, three examples deriving from three different countries, Sweden, Colombia and Burma, will be presented; The Church of Sweden's work to acknowledge their role in the repression of the indigenous Sami people, the Colombian community Trujillo's work for redress and memorialisation of the massacres and grave human rights abuses committed against members of their community, and lastly the Network for Human Rights Documentation Burma and their work to systematise and publish cases of human rights violations in Burma. Each truth project has its own specific characteristics, strengths and challenges.

The Swedish Foundation for Human Rights (SFHR) is a non-profit foundation founded in 1991, with the objective to promote human rights through human rights education, advocacy, and international development cooperation.



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