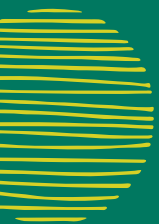


Annual report 2023





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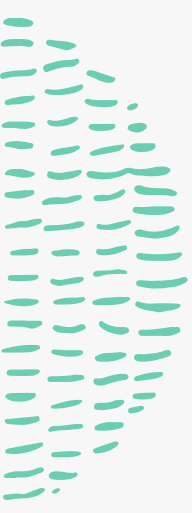
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About us

We are an international non-profit organisation working with victims, survivors and communities affected by violence to transform deeply ingrained structures of impunity, deliver redress for grave human rights violations, and promote justice and peace.

For more than 15 years, we have been working in countries emerging from violent conflict. We have found that victims know best what is needed to achieve justice for themselves and their communities and prevent violence from recurring. Despite this, they are routinely excluded from peace and justice processes. Our role is to address this omission and ensure their demands are met.

“The joint work with victims, survivors and affected communities is at the heart of everything we do. —”

Impunity Watch currently works in Central America, North Africa and the Great Lakes region of Africa, the Middle East and the Western Balkans. We have a presence in Guatemala, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and a global office in The Hague, the Netherlands.

We conduct comparative research on priority themes relating to overcoming impunity. In addition, we build international partnerships and coalitions to fight impunity and transform justice. These elements contribute to our international advocacy focus – mobilising joint political action for change.

We are committed to prioritising long-term engagements in our programming, operations and advocacy work, and operate at community, local, national, regional and international levels.



VISION

Our vision is that victims of serious human rights violations can shape the processes of justice to achieve redress and contribute to addressing the root causes of impunity. This will lead to justice and accountability becoming the norm.

MISSION

We work together with victims, survivors and communities affected by human rights violations to transform justice by:



Gathering and sharing knowledge on the root causes of impunity and what justice means from a victim perspective



Expanding our partnerships and working with coalitions of victims so that their collective voice and demands are strengthened



Mobilising joint political action with victims to ensure that justice processes are shaped by them, and policymakers act on their demands

Introduction

In 2023, Impunity Watch marked an important milestone: our 15th anniversary.

This was an opportunity to celebrate our achievements in the fight against impunity together with our partners and team, and a chance to thank our supporters for their solidarity and contribution. It was an important moment to reconnect with one another, and to reflect on the organisation's development and programmatic goals (see highlight box on right and more on page 26).

“Victims and survivors inspire us and give us the drive to go on, but justice means different things to different victims. At Impunity Watch, it's crucial for us to listen to them and understand what their definition of justice is.”

MARLIES STAPPERS, Executive Director

Our celebrations coincided with another key date: [the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). This was a poignant reminder of the universal values we stand for, and the collective responsibility we share in making them a reality. We live at a time of multiple crises and increasing polarisation, for example, the perceived double standards over the West's [lacklustre response to the situation in Gaza](#) compared with its active stance regarding Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Our combined efforts are needed to play a critical role in furthering the notion that human rights must benefit everybody. Addressing historic injustice plays an important role in moving forwards to protect universal values, as well as to draw attention to power structures that reinforce on inequality and division.

HIGHLIGHT

Celebrating 15 years of fighting impunity

On 4 October 2023, we celebrated our anniversary with an inspiring evening of conversation, arts, and food. We hosted a discussion on the power of culture and creativity in harnessing victim-led justice and its crucial role in fighting impunity, with panellists from Burundi, Guatemala, Syria, and the Western Balkans.



Photos: Holland Park Media



[Read more.](#)



[Watch our video:](#) We asked our grassroots partners, “What does a world without impunity look like to you?” Also in [English](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#) and [Arabic](#).

[Check out the timeline:](#) Look at the milestones that shaped our values, strategies, and impact.

Did you know? Our video was showcased at the launch of the UNSG Guidance Note (see highlight box on page 5), thus centring the voices and demands of grassroots voices at this event in an 'unprecedented' manner.

In 2023, despite working in extremely challenging environments with our partners, we took dedicated steps to create the necessary hope and conditions for lasting change. The past 15 years have taught us that solidarity and togetherness are what will drive us to this goal.

“We have found that working collectively and forming connections between individual actions are what lie at the heart of creating meaningful change.”

This is why we continue to build wider networks of victims, grassroots activists and others from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups. We connect them to relevant policy processes to push the justice agenda forward – including at the international level. We shall continue our support for victims and grassroots activists, to ensure their efforts and voices can grow in scale and impact. We will continue our work to influence ongoing policy processes, for example, as we did with our contribution to the UN Secretary-General’s (UNSG) Guidance Note on transitional justice (see highlight box on right).

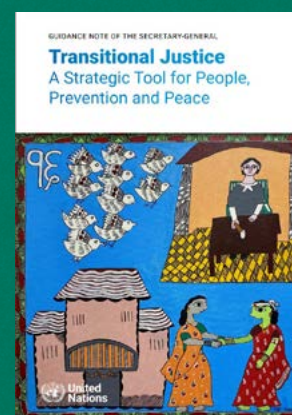
We have undertaken similar efforts together with the [Justice Action Coalition](#) in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) process, as well as at the regional level with the African Union (AU) and our partners in Africa to implement the AU’s Transitional Justice Policy (AUTJP) (see page 8). We succeeded in putting important topics on the international agenda, such as mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and addressing militarised masculinities. These have been identified by our grassroots partners as key needs and aspirations in the fight against impunity (see page 7). Additionally, we advocated for and shaped major institutional achievements in 2023, for example, the groundbreaking UN General Assembly resolution to establish a new independent institution to clarify the fate and whereabouts of the more than 100,000 missing in Syria (see page 20).

Ensuring victim participation and integrating their perspectives and voices more consistently into policy arenas where they can have an impact continues to be our future priority.

As we look ahead, we take stock of these achievements and commit to fostering a global community that stands united against impunity. Our interventions will include supporting the participation of grassroots actors in relevant policy discussions and in multilateral forums, the production of policy messages, and strategy development and strategic communication. All our work is guided by the objective to make a tangible difference in the lives of victims and communities affected by human rights abuses.

HIGHLIGHT

UNSG: Guidance Note on transitional justice



The UN Secretary-General has adopted the [Guidance Note on ‘Transitional Justice: A Strategic Tool for People, Prevention and Peace’](#), following a two-year consultation process. The document aims to achieve greater innovation in the design and implementation of transitional justice.

We are proud to have contributed substantially to developing the Guidance Note, including providing policy advice related to victim participation and meaningful reparations. This strengthened the document’s core message that ‘victims must be involved in shaping transitional justice processes from the start’.

We welcome the important emphasis that the new Guidance Note places on the central role of victim participation, addressing root causes of violence, and the need to ensure transitional justice processes deliver concrete results in victims’ lives.



[Find out more](#)

Our international and comparative work

GATHERING AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE

VICTIM PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

Victims' and survivors' perspectives in decision-making processes are crucial for overcoming impunity and achieving justice. Yet many barriers still stand in the way of meaningful participation and structural change.

In partnership with the University of Birmingham, we published a report highlighting findings from our multi-year comparative research project on [victim participation](#) in informal transitional justice processes (see highlight box below). Later in 2024, we will produce a short policy brief that combines our knowledge gained from previous research on victim participation to be made available to policymakers.



HIGHLIGHT

'We lead justice efforts': Overview report on victim participation

This report explores the perspectives and reflections of victims and survivors in their pursuit for justice across Colombia, the DRC, Guatemala, Indonesia, Syria, and Tunisia. It serves as an important resource for victim communities, policymakers and practitioners to develop inclusive, accessible, and transparent victim participation strategies. Additionally, it offers broader strategic insights for conflict prevention.



[Explore
the report](#)

VICTIM VOICES IN POLICY FORUMS

Together with our strategic partners, including the [International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses \(INOVAS\)](#), we created multiple spaces for the voices of victims to be taken into account in various international policy forums. This included the high-level launch event of the UNSG Guidance Note on transitional justice (see page 5), and our joint report with INOVAS on the importance of [transformative reparations](#) from a grassroots perspective. The UNSG Guidance Note highlights the INOVAS report as 'essential reading'.

Impunity Watch and INOVAS will develop guidelines on victim participation in formal and informal justice processes, drawing on findings from the victim participation overview report, to ensure the work of policymakers is more centred on victims. This will seek to demonstrate how additional sustainable policy processes can be meaningfully developed, with the ability to make a real change in victims' lives while addressing drivers of violence and structural injustice.

We contributed to the discussion of the role of civil society in transitional justice processes at key UN forums. In line with our contribution to the UNSG Guidance Note (see page 5), we participated alongside human rights defender Rosalina Tuyuc at a panel on the occasion of the 22nd Assembly of State Parties to the International Criminal Court, hosted by the Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations in New York.

CHALLENGING ESTABLISHED GENDER NORMS

As part of our work on [gender-transformative justice](#), we further developed our efforts on transforming militarised masculinities, which we have identified as crucial in the fight against impunity (see highlight box below). Violent or militarised masculinities are a key inhibitor for access to justice for survivors, as well as for the promotion of wellbeing and human security, but awareness of this issue is still underrepresented in policy work and frameworks on all levels.

Raising awareness of militarised masculinities as a root cause of impunity, and developing strategies to address this, will continue to take a central place in our work with victims, and inform advocacy on national, regional, and international levels.

HIGHLIGHT

Knowledge to action: Transforming militarised masculinities

Our country-specific research and practical work on the ground on this topic culminated in the publication of a policy brief on [‘Transforming militarised masculinities’](#). This reveals how militarised masculinities contribute to cycles of violence and impunity around the world, and argues for an urgent need to reflect and transform gendered norms constructed around force and violence.



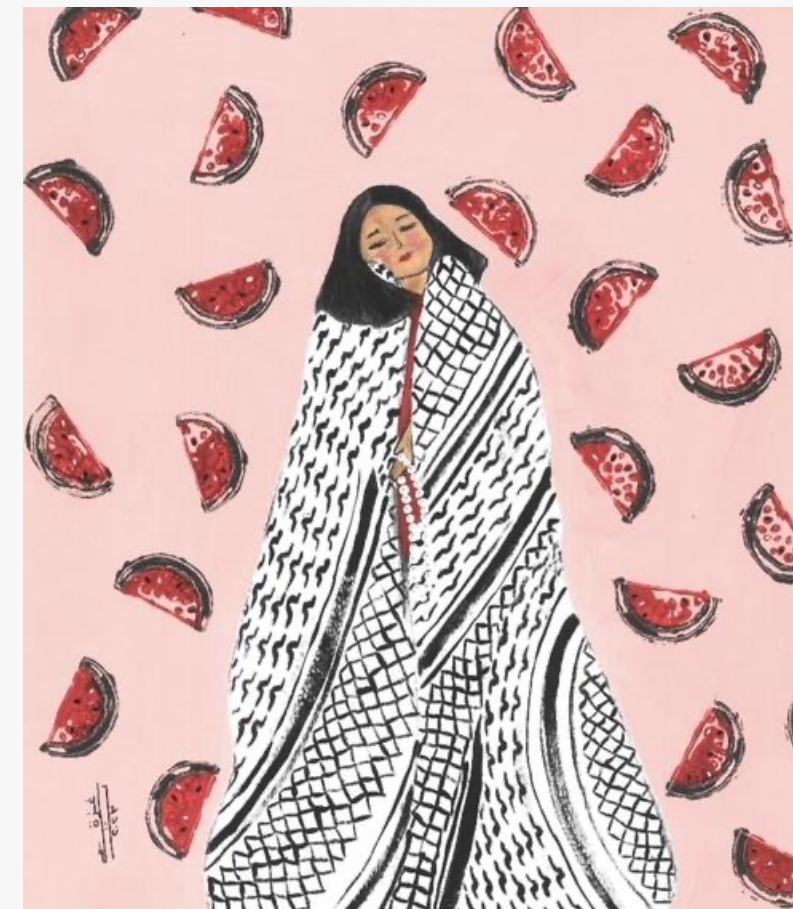
[Read the policy brief](#)



GROWING PARTNERSHIPS AND COALITIONS

SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINE

In response to the escalating situation in Palestine, INOVAS and Impunity Watch issued a [joint statement](#), calling for accountability and an immediate cessation of hostilities to protect civilians. The statement helps to amplify international solidarity among victims, bringing legitimacy to discussions and highlighting the root causes of violence and impunity.



Artwork: [Tala Abunawar](#)

AFRICAN UNION

In 2023, we rolled out a regional strategy encompassing our work with the African Union (AU) and our partnership with the [Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation \(CSV\)](#) (see highlight box on the right). A major focus is the implementation of transitional justice policies that can make a tangible difference at the grassroots level, creating strategies to help countries on the continent respond to the legacies of vast human rights violations. The AU's Transitional Justice Policy (AUTJP) is a core part of the strategy, which consists of youth mobilisation, research and knowledge production (on topics such as militarised masculinities, MHPSS), as well as national and regional policymaking.

Our growing role and influence on transitional justice in Africa was further strengthened by participation at AU-sponsored national consultations on transitional justice. In March 2023, we contributed to expert consultations on policy options as part of Ethiopia's transitional justice process, and in May 2023 we joined a second high-level consultative process on the process in South Sudan. Our key contributions included shaping gender transformative approaches to justice, integrating violent masculinities, and advocating youth participation. **Ongoing engagements with AU officials and bringing grassroots voices to the table are core components of our work in this respect.**

HIGHLIGHT

African youth perspectives: Key insights for transitional justice policymaking



Photo: Impunity Watch

With CSV, we took steps to increase youth engagement in transitional justice. Using the AUTJP as a basis, we created opportunities for youth to make their voices heard and place issues to influence change on the policy agenda. These include mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and dealing with violent masculinities.

Our partnership with CSV led to the publication of [policy briefs on these topics](#), based on the views of young people in Burundi, the DRC, Mali and South Sudan. These briefs were successfully launched in two webinars attended by AU officials, NGOs, community organisations, civil society representatives, and transitional justice experts.

Both briefs were presented at the [African Transitional Justice Forum](#) in Rabat, Morocco, in September 2023. In addition to shaping the discussions and themes at the forum, we supported youth activists and partners from Burundi and the DRC to take part.

Through our work, the intersection of violent masculinities and transitional justice are being discussed for the first time in the context of the AUTJP.

MOBILISING JOINT POLITICAL ACTION

INOVAS

In 2023, we continued supporting [INOVAS](#) with resources and expertise. The network demonstrated a strong commitment to fostering partnerships and ensuring inclusivity, contributing to the fight against impunity by strengthening international solidarity through various initiatives. One of these is the establishment of the annual [Anne-Marie Buhoro award](#) (see highlight box on the right). The award honours the memory of Anne-Marie Buhoro, a human rights activist and founding member of INOVAS from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Buhoro dedicated her life to combating sexual violence and advocating for gender equality, and was tragically killed by her husband. The award ceremony is a prime example of INOVAS' solidarity with victims and survivors, as well as recognising and supporting individuals who are making a significant impact in addressing sexual and gender-based violence in the Great Lakes area.

INOVAS continues to develop the impact of its work to strengthen the victims' agenda; raising awareness in policy, civil society, and academic settings; and advocacy and policy work (such as the contribution to the UNSG Guidance Note, see page 5). The launch of the [INOVAS membership programme](#) in July 2023 marked an important step towards expanding the network's reach and inclusivity, ensuring a more comprehensive representation of victim experiences. The new membership of four organisations from Syria, The Gambia and Nepal brings broader experience, knowledge, reach, and access. This strengthens INOVAS as a global voice on relevant transitional justice issues, with an increasing ability to influence the way forward and strengthen solidarity among victim groups regardless of geography.



Photo: Impunity Watch

HIGHLIGHT

Congolese women's rights activist wins Anne-Marie Buhoro award 2023

Congolese activist Tatiana Mukanire was the 2023 winner of the Anne-Marie Buhoro award, in recognition of her commitment to ending gender-based violence in the Great Lakes. The prize money will support the education of children whose mothers are survivors of sexual violence.

“Recognising the work we do inspires us to dream big and look to the future with optimism.”

TATIANA MUKANIRE, founding member of the Global Network of Victims and Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence (SEMA), and national coordinator of Mouvement des Survivantes, DRC (pictured in the middle, above)



[Learn more](#)

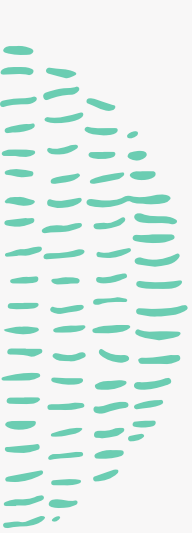
“The effort of INOVAS is to integrate more organisations to unify the voices of victims in different international forums.”

MIGUEL ITZEP, Plataforma Nacional de Organizaciones de Víctimas del Conflicto Armado Interno (PNOVCAI) / Founding member of INOVAS

Furthermore, INOVAS, in partnership with Impunity Watch, organised two national meetings with victims and survivors from the National Platform of Victims of the Internal Armed Conflict (PNOVCAI) in Guatemala, with more than 28 victims’ organisations present (see photos on right). Testimonies from platform members recognised INOVAS as a pivotal space for uniting organisations with similar objectives and for amplifying their collective voices on a global stage. The events served to transform victims’ perceptions of human rights restitution, promoting cohesion, and building international solidarity among surviving victims of crimes against humanity.



Photos: Impunity Watch



Our contexts

BURUNDI

In 2023, the arrest and conviction of the former Prime Minister laid bare Burundi's existing governance, political, and human rights challenges. The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burundi reported evidence of 'shrinking civil space' for political parties, civil society, NGOs, and the media. Rejecting these findings, the government organised high-level meetings in Bujumbura to re-establish the country's international and regional credibility. As in previous years, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission faces accusations of rewriting history through controversial and disputed historical accounts of the country's past.

In this context, we see that working at the community level is where we can make the most impact and build a stronger base for sustainable change. Our priorities in Burundi remain focused on community-driven transitional justice processes, away from the law courts. Recent political developments, the prevailing vulnerabilities of young people, and institutionalised attempts to manipulate history all affirm the relevance and necessity of our work. In 2023, our focus was to enhance victim participation, shed light on the multiple truths of conflict in Burundi, and transform violent masculinities.

Artistic and cultural initiatives have become central to our Burundi programme's transitional justice strategies, leveraging their power to address complex and sensitive subjects in subtler ways that are otherwise much harder to discuss or address openly (see highlight box on page 12). We scaled up our work to engage young people in discussions about Burundi's history through photography, storytelling, and theatre. This work counters the exclusion of young people from the national conversation on transitional justice, and seeks to represent nuanced collective memories, fostering acceptance and preventing violence.



An important component of transforming violent masculinities is addressing the lack of assistance offered to ex-combatants decades after their demobilisation. This has led to untreated traumas and a deep sense of resentment that are among the risk factors of violence at a societal level.

This is the significance of our work – through civic education, human rights, non-violence, and transitional justice, we worked with 100 ex-combatants across four provinces to tackle the political mobilisation of youth into violence, as well as gender-based violence. We provided the group with targeted mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) and trauma-healing to facilitate their reintegration into their communities. With participants reporting an improvement in their mental health as a result of being offered the space to discuss their experiences, and requests for further sessions, such initiatives contribute to the prevention and guarantee of non-recurrence of violence.

“This is the first time I've been able to share my painful past since returning to civilian life. I was deeply affected by the traumatic experiences I had during the war, which I didn't want to share with anyone.”

ANONYMOUS EX-COMBATANT, participant in our 'Twuzuzanye' ('Let's build each other, together') project.

Research to better understand how to reintegrate ex-combatants into their communities will be published in 2024. This will strengthen our efforts around preventing violence ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections. Separately, we conducted a dedicated three-day workshop on MHPSS with our partners and developed policy recommendations for further advocacy and implementation.



HIGHLIGHT

From portraits to plays: harnessing art and cultural traditions to confront Burundi's past

We organised a photo exhibition and fireside discussion on Burundi's history to communicate and preserve memories. In collaboration with Rweze, a collective of young women photographers, we launched a [photobook](#) capturing the portraits and the personal histories of 22 elderly Burundians. Rweze uncovered untold stories of violence, hope, resilience and heroism in Burundi since colonial times. This has preserved life stories and personal histories that might otherwise have been lost.

Drawing on traditional dialogue and storytelling practices, the photographic project and fireside discussion brought different generations together to reconsider and redefine narratives and interpretations of the past.

During the same evening, we unveiled a visual booklet containing the script and photographs of a play, '[IRAGI](#)' ('[Legacy](#)'), created with the theatre group Troupe les Enfoirés de Sanoladante (TLES). TLES worked with young people from across the country to create a [theatre production](#) tackling issues of inherited memories and intergenerational traumas. This has been performed in all of Burundi's 18 provinces, as well as a theatre festival in Bujumbura last year.

“The creation of the play *IRAGI* led me to understand that young people are not a homogeneous entity in terms of their reading of Burundian history.”

JOSUÉ MUGISHA, Troupe les Enfoirés de Sanoladante (TLES)



[Explore the photobook.](#)



Photos: Impunity Watch

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)

The political context in the DRC in 2023 was marked by, among other things, the general election that took place in December, the deteriorating security situation in the east of the country, and discussions on the exit of the UN Stabilisation Mission in the DRC. This mission hosts the UN Joint Human Rights Office in the country. In this context, progress stagnated towards finalising the draft national transitional justice policy, further delaying its implementation. Nevertheless, the government did create a national reparations fund to help implement the 2022 reparations law. This is considered a step forward, despite legitimate criticism of the politicisation of the process – the favouring of some victim groups over others – and the lack of meaningful victim participation.

In response to the lack of progress on the national transitional justice policy and its implementation, we organised a series of local and intergenerational dialogue sessions with our partners (see photos on right). Eight affected communities in North and South Kivu designed alternative approaches and community initiatives to deal with legacies of violent conflicts in their respective areas. In 2024, we plan to offer technical and financial support to implement these initiatives. This will contribute to meaningful victim participation in informal transitional justice processes in the country.



Photos: Impunity Watch

“The creation of a coalition of victim groups is very important. We have been fighting in a fragmented way for several years now, and we are finding it hard to find solutions to our problems. This coalition will enable us to join forces and carry out joint advocacy actions.

— VICTIM from South Kivu province

Our work with local partners in eastern DRC resulted in [coalitions being established](#) among victim groups across multiple provinces, strengthening their voices and enhancing their participation in transitional justice processes in the country. With the space to refine their claims and work together, victims articulate clear policy demands connecting the realities of their conflict experiences with national policy processes and their rights to truth, justice, reparations, and non-recurrence.

“This coalition will enable us to lobby and advocate together as victims, so that our voices are heard more and more. Unity is strength.

— VICTIM from Ituri province

In 2024, we will continue to support the victim coalitions by enhancing their capacity for advocacy and by linking them to opportunities to engage with policymaking at provincial and national levels. This work ties back to [our intervention strategies for long-term change](#), aimed at amplifying partnerships and coalitions, and mobilising political action. Our hope is that through more coordinated advocacy the coalitions may contribute to breaking the deadlock around the DRC’s national transitional justice policy.



Photo: Impunity Watch

GUATEMALA

The political context in Guatemala in 2023 was marked by the surprising win of democratic candidates Bernardo Arévalo and Karin Herrera of the centre-left Movimiento Semilla ('Seed Movement') party, and the Attorney General's Office attempt to annul the elections with the support of what's seen as the 'corrupt elite'. The Attorney General also continued the criminalisation and persecution of independent judges, prosecutors, journalists, and human rights defenders.

The country still experiences root causes of impunity, such as deeply entrenched racism that continues to marginalise indigenous groups and exclude them from meaningfully participating in policy discussions about topics that affect them. Enhancing their participation and leadership is of key importance.

The leadership of indigenous peoples, together with joint actions of civil society, and the international community throughout the second part of the year, were key to [defending democracy](#) and minimising the possibilities of continued impunity for the corrupt. The arrival of a new

(continued on page 16)



HIGHLIGHT

The future of transformative reparations for victims in Guatemala

During Guatemala's civil war, there were more than 200,000 victims during 36 years of armed conflict. This includes an estimate of 45,000 disappeared, 669 massacres and other grave human rights violations. For two decades, more than 80 percent of victims have received no reparations.

In the field of transitional justice, we continued to support the National Platform of Victims of the Internal Armed Conflict (PNOVCAI) and their demands for truth, justice, and particularly reparations, due to the closing of the National Reparations Program (PNR) in 2023. Reparations continue to be the most important and pressing demands of victims given the extreme marginalised conditions in which they live. A series of legal and political actions were carried out to demand the state's obligation to the victims of the conflict, including a seminar on human rights and reparations, where we presented our report 'Twenty years of the PNR: The Impact of the National Reparations Program for the Victims of the Armed Conflict in Guatemala'.

President-elect Arévalo attended the event, and his participation offered the opportunity for him to make commitments on this topic directly to the victims. He stated that it was his will to promote the peace agenda and announced a new reparations plan that would dignify victims. To ensure that this complies with victims' expectations, this will be central in our advocacy work towards the government in the upcoming period.



Photos: Impunity Watch

“ We cannot speak of justice if the state does not recognise its responsibility for what happened [during the armed conflict], and there is no democracy without full respect for human rights.

” MIGUEL ITZEP, PNOVCAI and INOVAS



[Learn more.](#)

democratic government is an opportunity for change in favour of human rights and the rights of victims (see highlight box on page 15).

In 2023, we continued to fight against the persecution of independent prosecutors and judges, which was part of a larger crackdown by the Guatemalan state on institutions to weaken judicial independence in the country.

We worked alongside national and international human rights organisations, such as the OHCHR and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). We supported the case of the unjustly-detained [Claudia Gonzalez](#), and fought the persecution of [Virginia Laparra](#). Both obtained protective measures and were released from prison in November 2023 and January 2024, respectively.

We continued giving legal advice to help deal with cases of gross human rights violations, such as [the Maya Achi women's case in Rabinal](#). In alliance with the Rabinal Community Legal Clinic, we assisted with the painting of a mural in the city centre to support the Maya Achi women, complying with one of the measures issued by the court in 2022 (see photo on page 14). In 2025, a second trial will be held against other so-called civil-defence patrollers for sexual violence against the Maya Achi women.

At an international level, **we monitored and supported the [Belgian trial against five former military and political officials](#)** for the murder, torture, and disappearance of Belgian missionaries in Guatemala. Some of our partners from Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, who knew the missionaries, participated as witnesses in the trial. In December, the former military were convicted, *in absentia*, and given sentences of life imprisonment.

To draw attention to continuing risks of a coup by lawfare (the use of the legal system by the state to delegitimize justice actors) in Guatemala, and to support the defence of democracy, **we strengthened our lobbying in Europe and the United States.**



Photo: Impunity Watch

We engaged swiftly in brokering space for victims' groups and affected communities, including advocacy trips to Geneva and Brussels, aiming to bring grassroots opinions, and in particular [indigenous leaders](#) opinions, in front of political decision makers (see photo above). This provided the grounds for decisive action by the international community to increase the pressure to safeguard a smooth transition to democracy. We promoted meetings with members of the election observation missions of the European Parliament, European Union Missions, the Human Rights Representative of the Netherlands, and others. We were also involved in ensuring ongoing monitoring of the situation in Guatemala at the level of the UN Human Rights Council.

As a result, statements condemning the political situation were published, including those from the US State Department, the UN Human Rights Office, and the European Parliament. Furthermore, the US issued sanctions against more than 100 individuals, including members of congress and businesspeople. For its part, the European Union created a sanctions regime specifically for Guatemala and in January 2024 [sanctioned](#) five corrupt judges and prosecutors, including General Attorney Consuelo Porras.

IRAQ

In 2023, the situation in Iraq deteriorated due to the merging of continued ethno-sectarian sentiment and the impact of regional geopolitical dynamics. Regional developments continued to have a serious impact on the security and political stability of the country, with Israel's war on Gaza since October 2023 bringing hundreds of thousands of Iraqis onto the streets and triggering frequent attacks against US military installations in Iraq. The US also engaged in attacks that resulted in the death of several Iraqis.

Despite the worsening context, Impunity Watch and our Iraqi partners continued to work on emblematic issues that pose a serious obstacle to the transitional justice process in the country. These included enforced disappearance and violations against those associated with the Tishreen Movement. Impunity Watch supported an unprecedented and inclusive [victim-centred campaign](#) on 15 August 2023, ahead of the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances (see photo on right).

Up to one million people are estimated to have disappeared in Iraq over the past half century, the highest number in the world. The campaign, which garnered huge amounts of national media attention, commemorated the disappeared. Victims called for their rights to truth, justice, and reparation.

“As a brother of four forcibly disappeared siblings, I do not feel alone anymore. We are coming together in unity to demand justice. We can now work towards justice together.”

KHAIRY ALJABOURI, Al Deerah Foundation



Photo: Impunity Watch

The campaign was preceded by a side event during the 52nd regular session of the UN Human Rights Council, organised by Impunity Watch and our partners. This was organised around the release of a report on the visit to Iraq of [the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearance \(CED\)](#). This event provided partners, including victims, with a platform at the UN to express their views on how to address the crisis of enforced disappearance in the country, and to call for the implementation of the CED's recommendations. We also partnered with the Iraqi Parliamentary Development Institute to draw attention to and provide space for discussion on the CED report, and the Iraqi parliament's role in legislating against enforced disappearance. In August 2023, we organised a dialogue forum in the national parliament in Baghdad to this end. In a poignant ceremony of remembrance, we are also very proud to have supported our partners in the construction of the first ever Memorial Garden dedicated solely to victims of enforced disappearances in Iraq on 4 March 2024 (see highlight box on the right).

We continued to support our partners' efforts to obtain reparations for victims of the Tishreen movement. We documented the experiences of hundreds of victims who suffered injuries during the Tishreen protests and placed these victims' demands and needs before the Iraqi parliament. Significant headway was made in proposing legislative amendments to the existing compensation law, to allow it to apply to Tishreen activists, which garnered significant attention and support in the country.

There is no sign of an overhaul of divisive and antagonistic limitations to civic space. We will continue to work for victims' rights in the country along with our partners, while remaining responsive and adaptive to developments.

STORY OF CHANGE

Iraqi victims unveil first memorial for the disappeared



Photos: Impunity Watch

The creation of the Memorial Garden was spearheaded by victims, survivors and their families, serving as a physical testament to their resilience, innovation, and ownership. It is a permanent reminder of their continued demand for truth and justice. The memorial also carries forward the memories of disappeared individuals and educates new generations about painful events in the history of their country.

“The memorial is a beautiful initiative... What’s most important now is for action to happen. The bodies of the disappeared abducted by ISIS must be found, and there must be more support for the families.”



[Read more.](#)

LOCAL RESIDENT SAJIDA,
whose husband was abducted by ISIS

SYRIA

Despite lessening hostilities in 2023, human rights violations continued to be commonplace across conflict lines in Syria. Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence and other violations were reported in regime-held areas. This was especially the case in detention facilities, as well as in areas controlled by non-state authorities. These reports were confirmed by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in a report published in September 2023.

Since the start of the Syrian uprising, at least 100,000 people have gone missing. The crime of enforced disappearance has affected countless Syrians, unaware of the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones.

“There can be no political transition in Syria unless the fate of the missing is clarified and the arbitrarily detained are released.”

KHALIL AL-HAJ SALEH OF MASSAR FAMILIES,
one of the organisations that formed the Truth and Justice Charter

In light of this environment, Impunity Watch continued to collaborate with, and provide support to, a number of Syrian victim, survivor and family associations and community organisations in their fight against impunity. We continued our calls for victim-centred justice. Building on its work in previous years, Impunity Watch provided diverse support aimed at amplifying the partners' voices and placing their cause high on the international agenda. This support built on the efforts of the victim, survivor and family associations that came together in 2021 under the [Truth and Justice Charter](#).

Following years of victim and survivor-led advocacy, a historic resolution was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 29 June 2023 to establish an independent institution to [clarify the fate of the missing in Syria](#) (see highlight box on page 20). It aims for greater systematic and coordinated efforts to determine the fate of the missing, while providing much-needed support to victims, survivors and their families.



Photos: Impunity Watch

HIGHLIGHT

Syria's victims mark historic UN resolution to address crisis of the missing

The [Independent Institution on Missing Persons \(IIMP\)](#) has been a long-standing demand of the Syrian victims and their families and constitutes a major step towards addressing Syria's 'missing' crisis.

This resolution is a huge victory for the family and victims' associations, who had spent years advocating for it as part of the Truth and Justice Charter. Impunity Watch was instrumental throughout the process in brokering space for families, and conducting strategic advocacy to help create the necessary impetus to establish the institution.

The IIMP brings hope for resolving cases of the missing in Syria and for addressing similar cases globally. The next steps are to make the institution operational, including providing it with the means to improve the lives of the victims and their families – especially their right to know the fate and whereabouts of the missing.



[Read more](#)



Photos: Guido Neira, The Syria Campaign

“This institution is the first concrete step to address the plight of the missing and was entirely envisioned by the survivors and the families... As someone who is still waiting for news about her loved ones, this institution represents a glimmer of hope.”

FADWA MAHMOOD OF FAMILIES FOR FREEDOM,
founding members of the Truth and Justice Charter

During 2023, we also continued our commitment to supporting communities affected by [Housing, Land and Property \(HLP\) violations](#). In partnership with PAX for Peace, and building on prior joint work, we highlighted the need to incorporate support for HLP rights into the mandate of the IIMP. The submission bore fruit and a paragraph was included regarding potential support for families of missing persons to access their HLP rights.

Following the adoption of the resolution, and to ensure a participatory and victim-centered process, we supported OHCHR in coordinating and facilitating consultation meetings with Syrian civil society, hosted by Switzerland. Through these consultations, as well as other bilateral meetings and written input, OHCHR sought to collect information from Syrian victim associations and other organisations regarding the Terms of Reference on the IIMP.

In the same context, Impunity Watch also supported the drafting of several written contributions by the Truth and Justice Charter associations and other partners that were submitted to OHCHR. The contributions covered victim participation, potential forms of support, mental health and psychosocial support, and Housing, Land, and Property rights (HLP). They included recommendations on how best to integrate these different elements into the work of the IIMP. Eventually, the terms of reference were released in December 2023. The document reflected the input of Syrian victims, NGOs and civil society, and provided a solid and comprehensive framework to guide the work of the institution.

In the months leading to the adoption of the resolution, Impunity Watch and partners organised several advocacy missions aimed at sustaining the momentum around the issue of missing persons, and rallying support for the IIMP. A delegation representing the Truth and Justice Charter met with several UN member states and other international actors and attended side-events to the United Nations General Assembly's 77th session. At the eighth Brussels Conference, we [co-organised a side-event](#) featuring a panel discussion about the IIMP, as a way to address the crisis of missing persons in Syria.

In June 2023, the governments of the Netherlands and Canada filed a case against Syria before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for violating the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (see page 19). Following a request from Canada and the Netherlands for provisional measures to protect potential victims while the case proceeded, the ICJ ordered Syria to [take all measures to prevent torture](#) and prevent the destruction of evidence, ensuring all available evidence is preserved.



Photo: Impunity Watch

In 2023, Impunity Watch organised a workshop to facilitate a conversation about narratives and counter-narratives around the Syrian conflict (see photo above). This was especially relevant because of widespread propaganda and fake news spread by perpetrators including the Syrian regime itself. We brought together representatives of victims' associations, journalists, researchers, artists, writers and others who have been involved directly and indirectly in shaping ideas for a peaceful future, and encouraged collaboration between them. A short policy paper with recommendations and best practices will be developed.

Finally, and as a way towards fostering global solidarity among victims, Impunity Watch published a report in April 2023 titled ['Deadly déjà vu: Russia revisits Syria war tactics in Ukraine'](#). The report drew parallels between Russia's military involvement in Ukraine and Syria and highlighted the need for cooperation between Syrian and Ukrainian civil societies. This was covered in [Al Jazeera](#) and the [Financial Times](#) and was received well by the general public.

TUNISIA

The year witnessed a continuous deterioration of the human rights situation in Tunisia, with political opponents, judges, and lawyers being targeted, persecuted and harassed. There were increased threats against local representatives and critical migration issues, as well as unresolved socio-economic and ecological crises.

The state moved forward with its own version of transitional justice, but its scope was limited to reparations for victims of terrorist attacks and those wounded in the 2011 revolution. Outcomes related to the Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC) were ignored. Tunisia expressed commitment to implement institutional reforms recommended by the TDC, but the government continued to implicitly deny victims' right to justice.

Given this challenging context, we organised a closed roundtable discussion in July 2023, where victims and their lawyers could explicitly discuss the socio-economic and psychological impact of the denial of justice. Victim participation must be key to sustaining efforts to promote transitional justice. During the round table discussion, participating victims recommended transformative approaches to obtain justice and address systemic impunity.

Providing technical support to those working in the field of justice is key to our work. We oversaw the consolidation of efforts of judges to contribute to the mission of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of the Judges and Lawyers. Despite challenges, such as the denial and delay of a request by the Tunisian government to organise an official visit for the Rapporteur, we coordinated with the judges who drafted the *Note on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers*. This Note was submitted to the Rapporteur to inform the [report](#) on the independence of the judiciary, and discussed at the 56th Human Rights Council. The document provided analysis of current developments in the Tunisian justice sector, to help with reforms and change.



Photos: Impunity Watch

Impunity Watch believes that there will be no transformation without meaningful participation of victims' groups in marginalised regions and communities. This is why we supported the efforts of young people in Tataouine to launch effective and meaningful memorialisation initiatives to help recognise and address the legacy of post-colonial atrocities. This also emphasised the importance of addressing root causes as a step towards redress.

We focused on enhancing the voice of youth in interviews, collecting data and gathering oral history, particularly among specific groups such as women who are victims, both directly and indirectly. Efforts were also directed towards the use of arts and digitalisation as tools to recover and [honour the memory of the survivors and victims of the 1956 Agri battle](#), and throughout the era of the dictatorship. The strengthening and inclusion of youth in memorialisation is crucial for recognising past injustices to break cycles of violence, and drive forward positive change. Amid restrictions in Tunisia, effectively including local communities in marginalised regions fosters safe spaces for victims, youth, and local actors to voice their concerns and inspire meaningful reforms through their actions.



WESTERN BALKANS

Civil society has been at the heart of dealing with the past injustices in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. They have fought together for victims' rights, helped to preserve the truth, tirelessly supported affected communities, and worked – with an inter-generational vision – on dealing with the past. A strong and independent civil society is the best guarantee for fulfilling the promise of 'never again'.

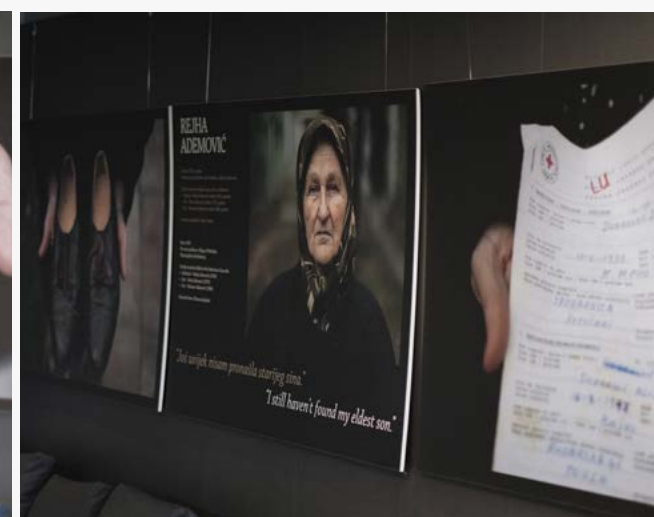
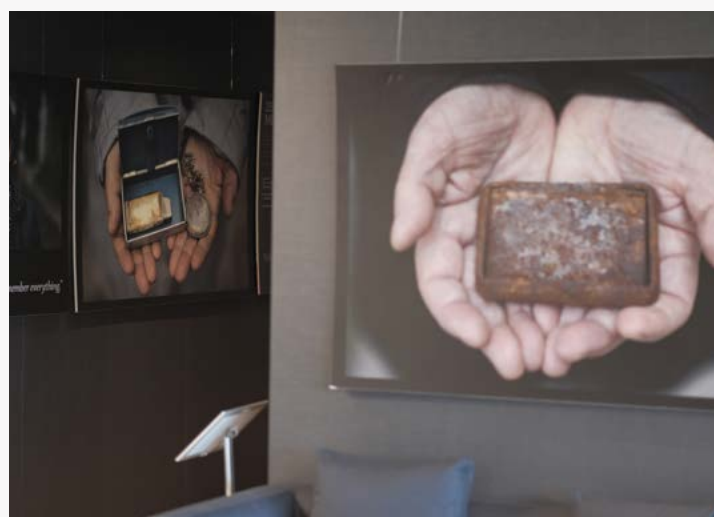
Yet, more than two decades after the end of the conflict, impunity for the crimes of the 1990s remains widespread in the Western Balkans and continues to undermine victims' demands for justice. New challenges, from disinformation to the denial of atrocities, pose a threat to lasting peace. A just future requires concerted efforts and solidarity with those fighting for the truth and retribution for past violations.

In 2024, we will resume our programmatic work on the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on reparations, through a lens of prevention and non-recurrence. This is a topic that is underrepresented, but a key demand that comes from grassroots groups. We will support the network building of community-based organisations and NGOs around transitional justice.

As part of the Western Balkans Coalition for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Crimes Prevention, we co-organised a high-level workshop in March 2024 with the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (see photos below). The workshop dealt with monitoring and supporting dealing with the past in the region in a transformative way with our partner, the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC). We helped to ensure high level participation in the events, including a key note speech by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as coordinating a video message by the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. This was a timely exercise, as there is currently increased policy attention on dealing with the past in the Western Balkans. It was an opportunity for the Coalition to work together on common strategies to address the current trend of glorification of war crimes and revisionism.

“Justice means that there is acknowledgment, that there is recognition [of harms], and as long as that is not there, it's very difficult for victims to heal.”

MARLIES STAPPERS,
Executive Director, Impunity Watch



Photos: PCRC

Fundraising

In 2023, we actively pursued and were successful in our fundraising efforts. We secured funding from two new donors: the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, and Open Society Foundations. In addition, we gained funding for the first time from the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). The year involved new grants that led to the continued growth of our programme in the DRC.

The grant from Open Society Foundations addresses the problem of double standards in international justice processes, by strengthening victims' voices and participation. It is implemented in partnership with the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) and contributes to our continuing support in the development of INOVAS.

The DRL grant supports our Syria programme, focusing on the involvement of Impunity Watch and seven Syrian partners in the establishment of the Independent Institution for Missing Persons (IIMP). The project is implemented in partnership with Women Now for Development as a co-applicant. The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs continues its support for our work in Syria, as well as supporting four partners with its work. In addition, we joined a DRL-funded consortium led by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, [the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation \(GIJTR\)](#).

We secured a significant four-year grant from the European Union. Led by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), we are a member of a consortium that seeks to contribute to the fight against impunity through establishing an observatory entitled '*The Global Initiative Against Impunity for International Crimes and Serious Human Rights Violations*' (see highlight box on (see highlight box on right, and photos on page 25), and photos on page 25).

HIGHLIGHT

Global Initiative Against Impunity: EU Consortium



The EU consortium is made up of nine international NGOs and two associate partners with complementary thematic and geographic expertise on justice and accountability. Impunity Watch brings our experience and expertise in victim-centred approaches, our analysis on gender transformation (addressing inequalities and barriers), and the involvement of our programmes in Burundi, DRC, Guatemala, Iraq and Syria.

This is an opportunity for us to develop work around emerging topics, such as the impact of artificial intelligence on justice processes and the link between environmental crimes and impunity.



[Read more](#)



Altogether, 2023 was positive in terms of securing important funding to enable continuation, consolidation and growth in some of our programmes. This is testament to the increasing recognition of the importance of our work and the added value we bring, our strong track record, and the reputation and relationships we have built.

As the political climate in the Netherlands and beyond shifts further far-right, putting the future of human rights at risk, we will take these global shifts into account in our fundraising strategy. The increasing recognition we are receiving for our work on brokering space for victims and grassroots voices to be heard is encouraging. We see the shifting context as a key moment in which we need to strengthen this course of our work. Hearing these voices will be more important than ever in the fight for more just societies.

We will therefore strive to deepen our relationships with our long-term partners and donors. At the same time, we will take up this pivotal moment to invest in reaching out and developing new alliances that centre victim participation and favour collective, peaceful, and just solutions.



Photos: Global Initiative Against Impunity





Organisational development

Early in 2023, we published our [Strategic Plan 2023-27](#) in four languages, and held an internal session to present and discuss the objectives.

In the second half of the year, we organised a global team retreat in The Hague as part of our 15-year anniversary celebrations. This provided the opportunity to celebrate our extensive contributions in the fight against impunity with our partners, reconnect with one another, share opportunities and challenges, and further our development and programmatic goals.

We also used the momentum of the 15-year anniversary to strengthen our communications and showcase the stories and voices of our grassroots partners. Our [public event](#) was attended by our partners, donors and supporters, and live-streamed globally. We also produced a multilingual [video](#) featuring the perspectives of grassroots activists from around the world on fighting impunity, which was featured at the event (see highlight box on page 4).

PRIORITIES FOR ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GOALS THAT EMERGED INCLUDE:

- Strengthening organisational structures and policies to better reflect our values and identity,
- Furthering work on our integrity system, including reviewing and updating our code of conduct,
- Improving internal communication, knowledge sharing, and cross-programmatic exchange and learning,
- Amplifying staff wellbeing, particularly in our work alongside victims of atrocities,
- Developing guidance for implementing our internal strategy for [gender-transformative approaches](#) to transitional justice, and
- Expanding our thematic topics, such as identifying the role of artificial intelligence in the fight against impunity.

Finally, we were proud to capture key milestones from our programmatic and thematic work over the years. The highlights were presented in a new [interactive timeline](#), showing the evolution of Impunity Watch's values, strategies and impact since 2008. We plan to further strengthen the key messages and stories from each context and provide more insight into how they are all connected in the fight against impunity.

Donors

We are very grateful for the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Oak Foundation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch Postcode Lottery, the European Union, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, the Open Society Foundations, the US State Department - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), and the UN Peacebuilding Fund.

Impunity Watch's audited financial figures for 2023, including income, expenditure, and results, will be available from July 2024 in our [Financial Report 2023](#)



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands



Belgique
partenaire du développement



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA



Where we work



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