

The world is experiencing a dangerous rise in impunity. As the current moment demands an urgent rethink of the collective fight against impunity, this document outlines Impunity Watch's updated position.

“ Together with victims and allies, we resist the normalisation of impunity – and work towards a world where justice and accountability are the norm. _____ ”

The fight against impunity is resistance. Our 15+ years of joint work with victims and survivors have taught us that breaking down structures of impunity requires evolving strategies as contexts change. Our core purpose is to support and strengthen resistance against structures and power-holders that enable impunity. We seek to advance a more inclusive world in which states and institutions actively promote the rights of all, fairly and equally. We see this as a collective, activist endeavour that requires strong coalitions operating locally, nationally, regionally and globally.

What is impunity?

Impunity is a political choice made by persons in positions of power within states, or by non-state actors, to tolerate or enable human rights violations, crimes or other harms, and exclude others from opportunities without fear of consequences.

Impunity is shaped and sustained by unequal power relations, historical abuses, authoritarian governance – or the opposite: the absence of governance, failed international interventions, and state institutions captured by corrupt or complicit elites. These create and sustain “structures of impunity” by lowering the political, legal, and moral costs of wrongdoing.

Impunity cuts across a wide range of crimes and violations, spanning many sectors and spheres of society. We focus on impunity in conflict, post-conflict and transitional justice contexts marked by war crimes and widespread and systemic human rights violations. It is here that we see the sharpest regression in adherence to standards, particularly regarding the rights of victims to fight impunity.

What challenges do we face?

A DETERIORATING GLOBAL LANDSCAPE

The global landscape for justice and accountability is deteriorating fast, with rules giving way to raw power. As the post-war legal architecture and commitment to multilateralism fade, norms and institutions created to protect the rights and dignity of all are rapidly losing their mobilising power, with no alternatives yet in place. Conflicts are becoming more fragmented and militarised, and peace negotiations now routinely exclude victims and marginalised groups, prioritising stability and increasingly “transactionalism” over safeguarding human rights standards. Globally, militarisation is rising, driven by geopolitical tensions and record military spending at the cost of social programmes, development aid and environmental protection.

At the same time, state capture is deepening, with the justice system increasingly used not to protect human rights but as a weapon to criminalise, attack and stifle dissent. The widespread use of social media renders it now even easier for ill-intended elites to use misinformation and nationalist, religious, or ideological framing to manufacture consent and legitimize seizing control over institutions intended to hold them accountable. Civic space contracts, as surveillance and legal control rise, funding for independent voices declines, and past movements of resistance and emancipation are recast as threats rather than inspiration.

Simultaneously, AI and new technologies are rapidly changing the face of warfare, creating new legal and ethical grey zones for accountability. Rising digital inequality risks to entrench impunity for those with money and access to tech, and make it ever more difficult for victims and marginalised groups to have their voices heard. Finally, reduced appetite to fund human rights work makes it harder for civil society actors to resist those trends and defend those whose rights are increasingly under threat.

Whom do we serve?

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE STAND FOR

Justice and accountability for victims and affected communities is our starting point and ultimate measure. We seek to partner as equals, contributing analysis, expertise, and political access. We anchor our engagement in the knowledge that victims are not a monolithic group solely defined by victimhood but a diverse group of citizens and political actors, with women and youth often taking a leading role in the fight against impunity.

“Our work is rooted in deep solidarity with victims and affected communities, especially the most marginalised.”

What drives us is the conviction that without justice and accountability, neither lasting peace nor credible democratic change is possible. Gains in one area resonate across others, sending a powerful message that resistance can yield results.

We prioritise geographic and thematic focus areas first and foremost on our ability to deliver meaningful impact for victims and affected communities in ending impunity. Our engagements are always anchored in strategies to deliver justice for victims that have the potential to uproot deep structures of impunity that drive systematic injustice and patterns of inequality, marginalisation, and racism.

Global resistance against impunity is growing

The current political moment also provides opportunities for change, with the potential to clarify priorities and forge coalitions that rarely align in calmer times.

All around the world, victims' groups, youth- and women-led movements, anti-racist and pro-democracy coalitions, human rights defenders and independent journalists continue to challenge impunity in political arenas, courts, communities, and digital spaces. Their bravery underscores that the need for a strong, activist civil society is greater than ever.

We see it as our responsibility to work alongside them, step up our analysis, boost our capacity to innovate and be a leading voice in the fight against impunity.

Our engagement strategies

As impunity is being normalised and the support for human rights work is dwindling, business as usual is not an option. The fight against impunity is rooted in the long-term struggle for justice and accountability, led by the persistent activism of victim and civil society movements throughout history. We are inspired by their political agency and capacity to continuously develop innovative strategies to disrupt the status quo.

The current moment requires us to reconnect with these roots, by putting political activism at the heart of everything we do, while increasing our capacity to discover new entry points, and strengthen impactful approaches to end impunity. This drives our engagements in each context, focused on resistance.

POLITICALLY-GROUNDED JUSTICE

Achieving justice must be linked to uprooting the root causes of impunity and shifting power dynamics. Our work has shown that this is the only way to advance change and ensure that impunity becomes the exception, not the rule.

Current structures of impunity find their origins in unresolved historical injustices. We believe colonial and imperial powers bear a responsibility to support efforts to dismantle systems of abuse, structural inequality, and impunity that persist in the societies they once so violently disrupted.

CENTRING YOUTH AND GENDER TRANSFORMATION

Youth play a crucial role in resisting impunity and mobilising for change. We support the creation of youth platforms and coalitions to influence policy and activism on the global and regional level.

Equally, we actively support women, who often lead the fight for justice. Our gender-transformative approaches challenge unequal power relations, with a key focus on militarised and violent masculinities.

INNOVATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

We are committed to an organisational culture of continuously innovating our strategies, and encouraging critical thinking towards confronting impunity.

We dedicate time and resources to promote ongoing learning and reflection, test new ideas, and share lessons and analysis across all the different contexts we work in. By systematically capturing and circulating this knowledge, we also seek to contribute to a global civil society that is better equipped to resist the current backsliding on justice and accountability.

AGILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

Shrinking civic space and a waning interest in human rights requires us to remain agile on behalf of those fighting for justice and accountability. The current moment demands that we can rapidly shift strategy as new entry points emerge or as political spaces close.

We are moving towards a more flexible organisational set up, driven by the most conducive methods for fighting impunity effectively in each context – without wavering on our commitment to victims and affected communities.

Our strategies for resistance

Our strategies centre around three mutually reinforcing pillars: rigorous research to guide action, strong coalitions for justice, and action and advocacy for change. We are sharpening our proven track record of work within each pillar, and systematically scaling up our efforts to strengthen the impact of our resistance.

ACTION-ORIENTED RESEARCH



We are stepping up efforts to produce rigorous, action-oriented research grounded in grassroots knowledge – mapping power structures, root causes of impunity, and entry points for resistance – to trace concrete pathways towards justice, accountability and reform. Our analysis seeks to inform, guide, and strengthen collective action by victims, victims’ organisations, and coalitions to shape policy responses and agendas.

Our research will be driven by the call to address new challenges and identify emerging spaces where mobilisation and resistance can take place. Topics include renewed threats such as state capture (especially of the justice system), criminalisation, militarisation, geopolitical trends and the role of “new” actors in impunity, exclusionary peace processes and elections, as well as emerging topics such as the role of AI in entrenching or resisting impunity. We deepen this work through collaboration with other knowledge institutions according to the topic and by strengthening our own data and analytical capacity, including through AI.

COALITION BUILDING



Strong coalitions are needed more than ever to push back against impunity. What we witness, however, is a shrinking civic space, with the meaningful participation of victims and marginalised groups in justice processes increasingly under attack.

In our strategic engagements with diverse networks, coalitions, alliances, and movements, we provide important connections to the grassroots, as well as our focus on political analysis. We work together as equal partners on roadmaps for resistance and change, connecting those who have suffered the most from violations, to the areas where decisions on impunity and accountability are made.

Developing messaging to challenge the narrative that impunity structures are too powerful to resist, form an integral part of our work. Our goal is to ensure that victims and marginalised groups are central actors in decision-making on peace and justice, not just token “stakeholders”.

ADVOCACY FOR CHANGE



We will continue to expand and refine our broad range of strategies to ensure they remain fit-for-purpose in the fight against impunity and to maximise impact in a shifting global landscape. This include increased advocacy, support to strategic litigation, joining mobilisation for resistance, and focusing on strategic communication.

With the world becoming increasingly multi-polar, we are intensifying our international advocacy. We continue to seek entry points in multilateral and regional institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, the African Union, and the European Union among others, while resisting their erosion and advocating for their reform. We are also deepening connections with broader civil society movements to create a new momentum towards justice and accountability.

Our thematic priorities

Resistance must be focused and grounded in real-world contemporary challenges in the fight against impunity. We have identified four thematic priorities for the coming years that address the systemic, cultural, and institutional drivers of impunity:



STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS

Reclaiming, reinforcing, and transforming institutions so they can effectively fulfil their mandates to promote and protect human rights and address serious and systemic injustices.



CHALLENGING MILITARISATION

Confronting the growing normalisation and expansion of militarised approaches that undermine human rights, weaken accountability, and shrink the space for gender-transformative and rights-based solutions.



YOUTH AND MOBILISATION

Supporting youth-led movements and strengthening collective action to reinvigorate the fight against impunity, make it future-proof, and uphold the promise of “never again.”



NEW TECHNOLOGIES TO FIGHT IMPUNITY

Advancing regulatory and accountability frameworks that ensure technology supports justice, protects human rights, and helps rebalance power toward rights-holders and affected communities.

“Together, our priorities form an agenda for confronting impunity in the 21st century. —”