

THE AFTERLIFE OF TRUTH: CONFRONTING IMPUNITY, TRUTH RECOVERY, & THE UNFINISHED WORK OF JUSTICE ACROSS AFRICA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Executive Overview

Thirty years after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began its hearings, scholars, survivors, activists, commissioners, legal practitioners, civil society actors and policymakers gathered in Cape Town to reflect on one of the most enduring and unresolved questions in democratic transition: what happens after truth-telling?

The TRC @ 30 Symposium was not designed as an anniversary event rooted in nostalgia, nor was it limited to retrospective reflection on South Africa's transition. Rather, the symposium created a comparative continental and global space for examining the afterlives of truth commissions and transitional justice processes across multiple jurisdictions, including South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tunisia, Colombia, Taiwan, South Korea, Togo and Mozambique. Across these contexts, participants reflected not only on what truth commissions made possible, but also on what remained unresolved decades later.

This long-view comparative approach distinguished the symposium from many transitional justice engagements. Discussions were grounded in hindsight, allowing participants to examine how transitional justice processes evolve once commissions conclude, political momentum dissipates, and societies confront the enduring realities of institutional fragility, structural inequality, civic fatigue, democratic erosion and contested memory. The symposium, therefore, focused on treating transitional justice as an ongoing political, social and moral process extending far beyond formal commissions.

The central argument that emerged across the discussions was that truth recovery is necessary, but insufficient on its own. Truth commissions may document violations, acknowledge victims and create public records of violence, but they do not automatically deliver justice, accountability, reparations or structural transformation. Participants reflected on the persistent gap between truth recovery and implementation, noting that many recommendations across different countries remain delayed, diluted or politically obstructed years after commissions completed their work. In South Africa, the failure to implement key TRC recommendations was identified not simply as a policy failure, but as one of the defining shortcomings of the democratic transition itself. Similar patterns were identified in Tunisia, Liberia, Kenya, Uganda and elsewhere, where institutional mechanisms were established without sustained political commitment or enforcement capacity.

The symposium also challenged overly legalistic understandings of transitional justice. While legal and constitutional protections were recognised as important, participants stressed that transitional justice processes cannot survive through institutional design alone. Tunisia emerged as a particularly important case study in this regard. Reflections on Tunisia's trajectory demonstrated how transitional justice, despite being constitutionally protected after the Arab Spring, gradually weakened through bureaucratic resistance, political polarisation and authoritarian resurgence. Participants warned that where transitional justice is embedded legally but not socially, institutions remain vulnerable to political reversal.

Questions of political will and accountability featured prominently throughout the symposium. Several participants argued that political will is manufactured through sustained public pressure, civic organisation, institutional resistance and social mobilisation. This reframing shifted attention toward the role of civil society, survivor communities and public memory in sustaining transitional justice processes after formal mechanisms weaken or conclude.

Civil society organisations emerged as critical actors across multiple contexts. In countries where state institutions stalled, lacked legitimacy or resisted implementation, civil society frequently became the primary driver of documentation, memorialisation, victim support and public accountability. At the same time, participants resisted romanticising civil society. Discussions acknowledged growing fragmentation, resource scarcity, leadership exhaustion and shrinking civic space across the continent. Reflections from Southern Africa, particularly Zimbabwe, highlighted the emergence of what participants described as "leadership fatigue" within social justice movements, raising difficult questions about sustainability, succession and institutional continuity.

Economic justice emerged as another major area of unfinished transition. Participants argued that many transitional justice processes focused heavily on civil and political rights violations while inadequately addressing economic dispossession, structural inequality and material exclusion. In South Africa particularly, discussions returned to the unresolved economic foundations of apartheid and the enduring concentration of wealth and land ownership. Similar concerns surfaced in Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe, where colonial and postcolonial inequalities continue to shape contemporary political and social tensions. Participants stressed that reconciliation without material transformation risks entrenching resentment and reproducing conditions for future instability.

The symposium also foregrounded the limitations of transitional justice processes in addressing gendered and cumulative harm. Participants noted that many commissions were designed around event-based violations occurring within narrowly defined timeframes, making them structurally ill-equipped to capture the relational, cumulative and ongoing nature of gender-based violence. Reflections from Colombia, Kenya, Liberia and Togo illustrated both advances and limitations in integrating gender-sensitive approaches into truth-seeking processes. Discussions emphasised that silence should not automatically be interpreted as absence of harm. Rather, silence itself often reflected fear, stigma, institutional design failures and the absence of conditions necessary for safe disclosure.

Intergenerational harm and memory also emerged as central concerns. Across contexts, participants resisted framing violence as confined to the past. Instead, discussions demonstrated how colonialism, authoritarianism, war and structural exclusion continue to shape present-day governance, political culture and social relations. This was particularly evident in discussions on Zimbabwe, Namibia, South

Africa and Korea, where participants explored how historical violence becomes embedded within institutions, national identities and collective memory across generations.

The symposium further expanded transitional justice conversations beyond Africa through reflections from Taiwan and South Korea. These interventions introduced important discussions around authoritarian memory, militarisation, imposed national identities and the politics of historical narration. Participants reflected on how states shape public understanding of violence, belonging and enemy construction through education, memorialisation and political discourse. These sessions deepened broader symposium discussions around memory, humanisation and the long-term social consequences of unresolved historical violence.

Ultimately, the symposium argued that transitional justice must be understood not as a finite institutional exercise, but as a long-term societal project requiring sustained constituencies capable of carrying memory, accountability and democratic repair forward across generations. Truth commissions may conclude formally, but the social, political and moral questions they raise remain active long after reports are written and institutions dissolve.

The TRC @ 30 Symposium therefore marked not the closing of a historical chapter, but a renewed confrontation with the unfinished work of truth recovery, justice and reconciliation in Africa and beyond.

Key Cross-Cutting Themes

Several interconnected themes emerged consistently across panels and country contexts:

- **Truth recovery as the beginning rather than the endpoint of justice:** Truth commissions establish historical records and acknowledgment but require sustained follow-through to translate findings into accountability and reform.
- **Persistent implementation gaps and stalled recommendations:** Many commissions produce detailed recommendations that remain delayed, diluted or unimplemented due to weak enforcement and political resistance.
- **The fragility of political will and democratic institutions:** Transitional justice outcomes often depend on shifting political priorities and institutions that can weaken or reverse over time.
- **Civil society as both driver and casualty of transitional justice processes:** Civil society sustains accountability and memory, yet faces resource constraints, repression and burnout in doing so.
- **Leadership fatigue, institutional exhaustion and shrinking civic space:** Long-term justice workplaces strain on organisations and leaders operating in increasingly restrictive and resource-scarce environments.
- **Economic inequality as unfinished transition:** Failure to address underlying economic injustices—such as land, wealth and exclusion—leaves root causes of conflict unresolved.
- **Structural and intergenerational violence:** Historical injustices continue to shape present-day institutions, identities and inequalities across generations.
- **Gendered silences and limitations of event-based frameworks:** Traditional justice mechanisms often fail to capture cumulative, relational and underreported forms of gender-based harm.

- **The politics of memory, archives and historical narration:** Competing narratives and control over historical records shape how societies interpret and respond to past violence.
- **Democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence:** Gains made through transitional justice can be eroded as political systems regress or concentrate power.
- **The tension between peace, accountability and political stability:** Efforts to pursue justice can conflict with fragile peace settlements or short-term stability concerns.
- **The importance of embedding transitional justice socially rather than solely institutionally:** Long term impact depends on public ownership, civic engagement and cultural integration beyond formal legal frameworks.

Key Recommendations

After four days of deliberations, the delegation put forward several cross-cutting recommendations aimed at strengthening transitional justice processes as well as sustaining efforts of confronting impunity.

- Transitional justice processes should integrate implementation mechanisms from the outset, including enforceable timelines, monitoring systems and accountability frameworks.
- Greater attention should be given to economic justice, structural inequality and material reparations alongside civil and political accountability.
- Transitional justice institutions require stronger constitutional and legal protections, particularly in contexts vulnerable to democratic backsliding.
- Civil society organisations should be recognised as central rather than supplementary actors within transitional justice ecosystems.
- Greater investment is needed in leadership development, institutional continuity and long-term civic infrastructure.
- Transitional justice frameworks should adopt more survivor-centred and gender-sensitive approaches capable of capturing cumulative and relational harm.
- Public memory, education, archives and memorialisation should be integrated into long-term democratic and reconciliation strategies.
- Transitional justice processes should prioritise intergenerational engagement, particularly involving youth and community-based actors.
- Universities and research institutions should play a more active role in accompaniment, documentation and long-term societal engagement.
- Transitional justice should be socially embedded within communities rather than relying solely on legal or institutional frameworks.

Introduction

Thirty years after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission first began hearing testimony from victims and perpetrators of apartheid-era violence, the questions raised by that process remain deeply unsettled. While the South African TRC became one of the most internationally recognised truth commissions of the twentieth century, its legacy continues to provoke intense debate regarding truth recovery, accountability, reparations, reconciliation and democratic transformation.

The TRC @ 30 Symposium, convened in Cape Town from 14–17 April 2026, emerged from recognition that transitional justice processes cannot be understood solely through the lifespan of commissions themselves. Rather, their significance often becomes clearer years later, when societies confront the realities of implementation, institutional fatigue, democratic fragility and unresolved structural violence.

Unlike many transitional justice conferences focused on immediate post-conflict interventions or institutional design, TRC @ 30 created space for retrospective and comparative reflection across multiple societies and historical trajectories. Participants were invited to consider not only what truth commissions achieved, but also what they failed to resolve, what remained politically contested, and what new forms of violence, exclusion and authoritarianism emerged in their aftermath.

The symposium, thus, situated South Africa's TRC within a broader global and continental landscape of unfinished justice. Discussions drew together experiences from countries emerging from civil war, authoritarianism, colonial violence, military dictatorship and electoral conflict, allowing participants to examine recurring patterns across contexts while remaining attentive to local specificities.

At the centre of the symposium lay a fundamental question on what sustains transitional justice after formal institutions conclude.

Across the four days, participants returned to the recognition that truth recovery cannot be treated as a singular historical event. Rather, it is an ongoing societal process shaped by political contestation, institutional resistance, civic mobilisation, public memory and intergenerational transmission. In this sense, the symposium challenged narrow understandings of transitional justice as confined to commissions, tribunals or legal reforms alone. Instead, it foregrounded the broader social, moral and political labour required to sustain democratic repair over time.

Truth as Beginning, Not End: Revisiting the Promise and Limits of Truth Commissions

Opening conversations on the first day of the symposium centred on the enduring legacy of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the unresolved relationship between truth recovery, accountability and democratic transition. While the South African TRC remains one of the most internationally recognised truth commissions, participants cautioned against viewing it as either a completed project or a universally successful model. Instead, discussions framed the Commission as the beginning of a longer and still unfinished process of democratic repair.

As dawn broke on the deliberations of the symposium, speakers surfaced the concern that truth commissions often succeed in recovering and documenting truth, but struggle to secure implementation, accountability and structural transformation once their formal mandates conclude. Reflections on South Africa's transition were placed alongside experiences from Tunisia, Liberia,

Uganda and Kenya, allowing participants to examine what becomes visible years after commissions complete their work and public attention begins to recede.

In South Africa, several speakers argued that one of the central failures of the post-apartheid transition was not necessarily the TRC process itself, but the democratic state's inconsistent implementation of its recommendations. Discussions highlighted longstanding frustrations surrounding delayed prosecutions, uneven reparations and the absence of deeper economic transformation. Participants returned to the reality that while the TRC created a detailed historical record of apartheid violence and opened important spaces for public acknowledgment, many survivors continue to experience unresolved material and psychological harm decades later.

These reflections complicated simplistic understandings of reconciliation. Rather than treating reconciliation as a singular moment achieved through testimony and forgiveness, participants described it as an ongoing political and social process requiring sustained institutional commitment, public participation and material transformation. Several contributors stressed that truth recovery alone cannot dismantle entrenched systems of inequality, exclusion and structural violence.

While South Africa remained an important point of reference throughout the symposium, discussions demonstrated that similar tensions have emerged across multiple transitional justice contexts. Liberia featured prominently within these comparative reflections. Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established after fourteen years of civil conflict, documented extensive atrocities including killings, forced displacement, sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers. The Commission produced detailed recommendations for prosecutions, reparations and institutional reform, including urgent support services for survivors of gender-based violence.

Yet participants noted that implementation of these recommendations has remained severely limited. Successive governments failed to establish meaningful accountability processes or allocate sufficient resources for survivor support and reparations. While the Commission succeeded in producing a historical record and documenting patterns of abuse; many survivors continue to confront barriers in accessing healthcare, compensation, psychosocial support and legal redress years after the process formally concluded. It was on this basis that one of the speakers raised concerns over the gap between truth recovery and substantive justice.

Similar concerns surfaced in discussions on Uganda. Reflections on Uganda's transitional justice landscape illustrated the tensions that emerge when societies attempt to balance peace-building, accountability and political stability simultaneously. Uganda adopted a hybrid approach combining amnesty measures, traditional justice practices, domestic prosecutions and international criminal accountability mechanisms. Speakers, however, noted that accountability has remained uneven, particularly regarding state actors, while many historical abuses preceding the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army were never comprehensively addressed.

Participants returned to the difficulty of pursuing justice in contexts where political settlements remain fragile or incomplete. While prosecutions may advance accountability in some contexts, several contributors noted that criminal trials can also become politically contentious or destabilising where institutions remain weak and social divisions unresolved. Against this context, several speakers resisted presenting transitional justice as a universally linear process moving neatly from violence to accountability and reconciliation.

Conversations on South Sudan further deepened these tensions. South Sudan's transitional justice framework, established through the Revitalised Peace Agreement, includes a Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, a Hybrid Court and a reparations authority. In spite of these frameworks, participants highlighted how the country's deep political and ethnic fragmentation has shaped a stronger emphasis on restorative rather than punitive justice. Resultingly, community-based approaches and customary practices have been prioritised in efforts to rebuild social cohesion and prevent renewed violence.

At the same time, speakers cautioned that prolonged postponement of accountability can undermine public trust and entrench cultures of impunity. This tension between peace and justice surfaced across the symposium, with participants acknowledging that transitional justice processes often operate within unstable and politically constrained environments where there are no easy or universally applicable solutions.

By the close of the first day, discussions had also begun moving more explicitly toward the relationship between truth recovery and structural inequality. Several participants argued that many truth commissions, including South Africa's, succeeded in documenting political violence while struggling to meaningfully address economic dispossession, land inequality and structural exclusion. Questions of economic justice emerged as an increasingly important area of unfinished transition across multiple contexts.

Kenya provided one of the clearest examples of attempts to broaden transitional justice beyond civil and political violations alone. Kenya's Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission adopted an unusually expansive mandate, investigating not only political violence but also economic crimes, historical injustices and structural inequalities dating back to the colonial period. The discussants observed how the Commission situated post-election violence within longer histories of colonial land dispossession, ethnic marginalisation and state violence.

Participants also reflected extensively on the Kenyan Commission's engagement with sexual and gender-based violence. Testimony documented how sexual violence had recurred across multiple periods of repression and political conflict, from colonial detention camps during the Mau Mau uprising to post-election violence in 2007–2008. Yet despite the Commission's extensive findings and recommendations, implementation has remained uneven and incomplete. Survivors continue to face significant barriers in accessing healthcare, compensation and institutional support.

These discussions reinforced one of the symposium's central arguments: truth commissions can create historical records, public acknowledgment and institutional recommendations, but they cannot by themselves guarantee justice, reform or social transformation. Across contexts, participants demonstrated that truth recovery should be understood as an opening rather than an endpoint. Its long-term significance depends heavily on whether societies sustain political commitment, civic pressure and institutional follow-through long after commissions formally conclude.

As conversations progressed into the second day of the symposium, discussions increasingly shifted from the limitations of truth recovery itself toward the broader political and institutional conditions that determine whether transitional justice processes endure, weaken or collapse over time.

Political Will, Democratic Erosion and Institutional Fragility

As the sobering reflections of the first day settled, day two turned towards the unresolved relationship between transitional justice and political power. While truth commissions often generate important historical records and institutional recommendations, speakers reflected on how the long-term survival of these processes depends heavily on political conditions that frequently deteriorate once immediate transitional moments begin to fade.

A central concern emerging across panels was the fragility of transitional justice institutions in contexts marked by democratic erosion, executive consolidation and weakening civic space. Participants demonstrated that transition rarely unfolds in a linear or complete manner. Instead of moving steadily from violence toward stable democratic consolidation, many societies continue to experience cycles of institutional weakening, political resistance and authoritarian adaptation years after formal transitions are declared complete.

Tunisia emerged as one of the symposium's most significant comparative case studies in this regard. Reflections on Tunisia's post-Arab Spring transitional justice process illustrated both the possibilities and vulnerabilities of institutionally ambitious reform processes. Following the 2011 revolution and the removal of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia established one of the region's most comprehensive transitional justice frameworks. Transitional justice was formally embedded within the 2014 Constitution, while the Organic Law on Transitional Justice created specialised institutions, including the Truth and Dignity Commission and dedicated judicial chambers.

At the time, many believed that constitutional protection would secure the process against future political interference. It became evident that institutional protection alone proved insufficient once broader political conditions began shifting. Speakers noted how institutions resisted releasing archives, security structures limited cooperation and prosecutions became increasingly delayed or obstructed. Speakers whose work has involved the realisation of the promises of Tunisia's transitional justice process described this process as a gradual erosion. According to their submission, a gradual erosion refers to a state where transitional justice mechanisms remained formally present while steadily losing institutional authority, political legitimacy and public traction.

By the time Tunisia entered its current period of democratic backsliding and executive consolidation, transitional justice institutions had already become significantly weakened. The replacement of the 2014 Constitution, suppression of judicial independence and weakening of intermediary bodies accelerated this process further. Several contributors reflected on how transitional justice became increasingly marginalised once broader democratic institutions deteriorated and public ownership weakened.

Tunisia's experience generated wider comparative reflections throughout the symposium. Participants stressed that transitional justice processes cannot survive through legal design alone. Where they remain narrowly institutional or technocratic, detached from sustained public participation and social ownership, they become vulnerable to political reversal once democratic conditions weaken.

This concern resonated strongly with discussions from Southern Africa. By the third day of the symposium, conversations had shifted more directly toward the relationship between institutional fragility, civic leadership and shrinking democratic space. Reflections from Zimbabwe introduced a

particularly introspective discussion on the condition of transitional justice movements themselves and the growing pressures confronting civil society actors across the continent.

Drawing on Zimbabwe's experience, one of the speakers argued that what is often described as a lack of political will should instead be understood as a broader leadership and accountability crisis. Political will, he suggested, does not emerge naturally from the state. It is produced through organised pressure, civic mobilisation, public memory and sustained institutional resistance. Justice advances not because political elites suddenly become willing, but because societies organise themselves in ways that make denial increasingly unstable and politically costly.

Participants reflected on how Zimbabwe's transitional justice landscape remains heavily constrained by political interference, institutional weakness and unresolved histories of violence stretching from the colonial period through Gukurahundi, Operation Murambatsvina and more recent episodes of state repression. Although institutions such as the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission formally exist, discussions highlighted concerns regarding selective implementation, executive control and limited public confidence.

At the same time, contributors resisted reducing the crisis solely to state failure. Increasingly, speakers turned their attention to the condition of civil society itself. Participants spoke openly about resource scarcity, leadership exhaustion, shrinking civic space and the fragmentation of social justice movements across the region. One of the discussants described this moment as one marked not only by victim fatigue or donor fatigue, but also by "leadership fatigue", where civil society leaders increasingly operate in conditions of isolation, burnout and institutional uncertainty.

These reflections broadened the symposium's understanding of transitional justice beyond commissions and courts alone. Increasingly, discussions focused on the long-term civic and institutional ecosystems required to sustain accountability, memory and democratic repair across generations.

Uganda and South Sudan offered further examples of the tensions that emerge when transitional justice processes operate within fragile political settlements. In Uganda, participants reflected on how accountability mechanisms have remained uneven and politically selective, particularly regarding state actors. Meanwhile, South Sudan's emphasis on restorative and community-based approaches revealed the difficulty of balancing accountability with peace-building in contexts of ongoing instability and social fragmentation.

As speakers shared their cross-continental experiences, submissions by speakers from Taiwan and South Korea made it poignant how unresolved authoritarian legacies continue shaping political life decades after formal democratisation. In Taiwan, participants explored ongoing disputes surrounding public memorialisation, authoritarian symbolism and historical responsibility, while discussions on South Korea highlighted how militarisation, war memory and ideological division continue structuring social and political life across generations.

What became evident as the day reached its conclusions is that transitional justice processes remain deeply vulnerable where they are not socially embedded. Institutions, laws and commissions matter, but they cannot sustain themselves independently of broader democratic culture, civic participation and public ownership. As one contributor reflected during discussions on Tunisia, transitional justice

must be rooted not only constitutionally, but socially, if it is to endure through changing political conditions and institutional pressures.

Civil Society, Leadership and the Struggle Behind the Struggle

As the symposium began to conclude, and speakers recognised their shared experiences, pain points, and frustrations engendered by the transitional justice processes in their various contexts; they were also encouraged by the wins that has resulted from continued efforts to confront impunity beyond truth commissions and truth recovery frameworks. While earlier sessions focused heavily on truth recovery, implementation and institutional fragility, discussions increasingly turned toward the condition of civil society itself and the growing pressures confronting those engaged in justice, memory and accountability work across different contexts.

Civil society organisations emerged as central actors within transitional justice processes, particularly in contexts where states lacked either the willingness or capacity to sustain implementation. Participants reflected on how civil society groups have frequently assumed responsibility for documentation, victim support, memorialisation, advocacy and institutional monitoring long after formal commissions end. In many countries, they effectively function as the custodians of public memory and the primary constituency continuing to demand accountability when political attention shifts elsewhere.

At the same time, the symposium's delegation resisted romanticising civil society. Several contributors argued that transitional justice conversations often overstate the coherence and resilience of civil society actors while understating the structural pressures under which they operate. For examples during reflections from Southern Africa, speakers openly examined the exhaustion, fragmentation and uncertainty affecting many justice movements across the continent.

Zimbabwe featured prominently within these conversations. Drawing on the Zimbabwean experience, one of the speakers described what he referred to as “the struggle behind the struggle”: the less visible crisis unfolding within the leadership and institutional ecosystems of civil society itself. He argued that transitional justice movements across Southern Africa are confronting a convergence of pressures including state hostility, shrinking civic space, resource scarcity, institutional fatigue, leadership isolation and burnout. In this context, the challenge is no longer only whether states are willing to pursue justice, but whether civil society possesses the organisational strength and sustainability necessary to continue carrying the work forward over time.

Another speaker noted that Zimbabwe's transitional justice trajectory has remained deeply constrained by political management, selective engagement and institutional weakness. While state-led mechanisms such as the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission formally exist, it was highlighted that those persistent concerns regarding executive interference, limited public trust and the broader suppression of independent accountability processes. In response, civil society organisations, survivor groups, churches, artists and grassroots initiatives have increasingly become the primary sites through which memory, documentation and public dialogue continue to survive.

The symposium participants broadly agreed, here, that this work comes at significant cost. The emotional and institutional burden carried by civil society actors operating within hostile political environments over long periods of time was noted as a point of grave concern. Speakers described how many organisations now function in a near constant state of crisis management, responding

simultaneously to political repression, donor instability, technological disruption and internal organisational strain. One discussant referred to this moment as one marked by compounding forms of fatigue including victim fatigue and donor fatigue, and also leadership fatigue.

This theme resonated across multiple country contexts. Participants from Uganda reflected on how civil society organisations have often become the primary providers of victim support, reconciliation initiatives and community engagement, particularly in northern Uganda where state-led implementation remained inconsistent. However, contributors also noted that civil society actors are frequently excluded from formal planning processes or expected to sustain long-term implementation work without adequate institutional support or resources.

Similarly, discussions on South Sudan highlighted how high levels of political instability and turnover within government structures force civil society organisations to restart engagement processes with new officials and institutions. Participants reflected on how inconsistent political leadership complicates long-term implementation planning and creates uncertainty around transitional justice priorities and institutional continuity.

The Gambian experience offered a contrasting example. Contributors reflected on how civil society organisations and victim-led movements played a particularly active role in sustaining pressure for accountability following the work of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission. Rather than remaining external observers, civil society actors in The Gambia maintained direct engagement with implementation processes and continued applying pressure on government institutions after the commission concluded. Participants described this as an example of transitional justice becoming more socially embedded and publicly owned.

Conversations throughout the third day increasingly moved beyond immediate implementation concerns toward broader questions of sustainability, succession and leadership development within justice movements themselves. Several contributors reflected on the danger of transitional justice becoming overly dependent on a small number of highly visible individuals, commissioners, activists or survivor leaders. While acknowledging the immense contribution of such figures, participants argued that movements built too heavily around exceptional personalities often struggle to reproduce leadership across generations.

These reflections generated important discussions around institutional memory and leadership pipelines. Contributors questioned whether transitional justice movements are adequately preparing younger generations to continue justice work over the coming decades, particularly in contexts where many of the individuals who shaped earlier struggles are ageing, exhausted or increasingly isolated.

Questions of accompaniment and care also emerged strongly throughout these discussions. Discussants argued that transitional justice work frequently demands sustained emotional labour from survivors, researchers, activists, lawyers, clergy and community organisers without creating corresponding infrastructures of psychosocial support and institutional care. The discussants stressed that movements attempting to confront wounded societies cannot themselves remain structurally wounded and exhausted indefinitely.

These discussions were closely connected to broader reflections on civic space and democratic decline. Participants observed that transitional justice processes often become increasingly vulnerable precisely when broader democratic institutions weaken. Shrinking civic space, attacks on independent

media, restrictions on civil society organisations and weakening judicial independence all directly affect the ability of societies to sustain accountability and public memory over time.

At the same time, contributors emphasised that transitional justice leadership should not be understood solely through formal institutions or professionalised activism. The discussions returned to the importance of community-rooted leadership emerging directly from affected communities rather than exclusively from elite policy, academic or NGO spaces. Participants reflected critically on the growing professionalisation of parts of the social justice sector and the risk that transitional justice work becomes detached from the communities most directly affected by violence and exclusion.

These reflections deepened the symposium's broader argument that transitional justice is not simply a technical or institutional exercise. Rather, it is a long-term societal struggle over memory, recognition, accountability and the terms through which societies attempt to live together after violence. Commissions, courts and legal frameworks remain important, but they cannot function sustainably without broader constituencies capable of carrying the work forward politically, socially and institutionally.

As the day wrapped up, it was broadly echoed that one of the greatest challenges facing transitional justice processes today is not only whether states are willing to pursue justice, but whether societies are able to sustain the civic, institutional and moral energy required to continue demanding it across generations.

Economic Justice and the Unfinished Transition

Over the course of the symposium, several cross-cutting themes emerged. One of these themes as raised as a question on what happens when societies pursue political reconciliation without fundamentally addressing economic injustice.

While many truth commissions have focused heavily on civil and political rights violations, speakers reflected on how questions of land, wealth concentration, labour exploitation, dispossession and structural inequality frequently remain inadequately addressed within transitional justice frameworks. The contributors argued that this gap continues to undermine reconciliation processes across multiple contexts, particularly where historical patterns of exclusion remain materially intact decades after formal transitions.

Discussions on South Africa featured prominently within these reflections. Participants noted that while the TRC succeeded in exposing patterns of apartheid violence and state repression, it did not fundamentally transform the economic structures underpinning apartheid itself. Wealth concentration, spatial inequality, land dispossession and racialised economic exclusion continue shaping contemporary South African society, leading several speakers to argue that the democratic transition remains incomplete at a structural level.

Contributors explained how the separation of political transition from economic transformation created enduring tensions within post-apartheid South Africa. While political rights expanded significantly after 1994, many communities continue experiencing the long-term consequences of dispossession, exclusion and economic marginalisation. Here, discussants challenged narrow understandings of reconciliation that focus primarily on symbolic acknowledgment without corresponding material transformation.

These concerns extended well beyond South Africa. In Kenya, for example, one of the speakers noted the deep relationship between historical injustice, land dispossession and recurring political violence. Drawing on experiences of Kenya's Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, the speaker argued that the Commission situated post-election violence within longer histories of colonial land alienation, ethnic marginalisation and unequal resource distribution dating back to British colonial rule.

Participants noted that colonial systems of land allocation and political patronage continued shaping post-independence governance structures and electoral tensions long after formal independence. Moreover, it was posited that transitional justice processes which fail to engage meaningfully with land inequality and economic exclusion risk addressing symptoms of violence without confronting their deeper structural causes.

Namibia generated similar discussions around colonial continuity and unresolved economic inequality. Participants reflected on how Namibia's post-independence approach prioritised political reconciliation and national unity while avoiding more confrontational processes of accountability and redistribution. Although Germany formally acknowledged the Herero and Nama genocide and discussions around reparations have advanced in recent years, contributors noted ongoing frustrations regarding the exclusion of affected communities from negotiations and the limited progress around land redistribution and economic transformation.

Another speaker emphasised that colonialism should not be understood solely as a historical event located in the past. Rather, colonialism must be seen as an ongoing structural condition that continues shaping land ownership, economic opportunity, governance systems and social inequality across multiple societies. This perspective became especially important in conversations linking historical violence to contemporary political instability and public distrust.

In Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Kenya, unresolved economic and land questions remain deeply entangled with broader transitional justice concerns. Contributors reflected on how liberation-era promises of redistribution and structural transformation became increasingly entangled with authoritarian governance, political violence and contested state legitimacy over time. Representatives of these contexts noted that unresolved colonial inequalities continue influencing contemporary political tensions, even as state narratives surrounding land and liberation remain tightly politically controlled.

It became clear in the combined experiences across Southern, Western, and Eastern Africa that challenges around economic crimes and systemic extraction were limiting factors in the success of confronting impunity. Some participants argued that transitional justice frameworks have historically treated economic violence as secondary to physical violence despite the profound and long-term social consequences of dispossession, corruption and structural exploitation.

South Africa again became a central reference point in this regard. Contributors proposed the possibility of more explicit investigations into economic crimes linked to apartheid and democratic-era corruption, arguing that questions surrounding who benefited economically from systems of violence and exclusion remain insufficiently addressed. It was noted that transitional justice processes frequently document bodily harm while paying comparatively less attention to systems of wealth accumulation, labour exploitation and economic extraction that sustain violence over time.

Colombia provided an important comparative example of attempts to integrate broader structural analysis into transitional justice processes. Discussions on Colombia's Truth Commission highlighted how intersectional approaches enabled the Commission to analyse the relationship between violence, race, land and inequality more comprehensively. Participants reflected on how Colombia's process attempted to situate conflict within broader systems of exclusion and structural discrimination rather than treating violence as isolated incidents detached from social and economic context.

Throughout these discussions, speakers stressed that economic inequality is not simply a background condition to transitional justice. Considerably, it often constitutes one of the central unresolved dimensions of violence itself. Where systems of exclusion remain materially intact, societies frequently continue reproducing the conditions that fuel resentment, instability and political conflict across generations.

In this vein, some participants argued for broader understandings of reparative justice that move beyond individual compensation toward structural transformation. Discussions highlighted the importance of land reform, public services, healthcare access, education, psychosocial support and economic inclusion as part of longer-term democratic repair.

At the same time, contributors acknowledged the political sensitivity surrounding economic redistribution across many contexts. Questions of land, wealth and restitution frequently intersect with elite interests, state legitimacy and ongoing political contestation, making them among the most difficult dimensions of transitional justice to implement meaningfully.

Nevertheless, by the close of these sessions, one point had become increasingly clear across multiple country experiences: reconciliation processes that fail to engage seriously with economic injustice risk remaining politically fragile and socially incomplete.

Gendered Harm, Silence and the Limits of Transitional Justice Architecture

Another cross-cutting theme was on gender, memory and survivor experiences. Here, participants reflected on the limitations of many transitional justice frameworks in capturing the full complexity of violence experienced during conflict, authoritarianism and political repression. While truth commissions have increasingly incorporated gender-sensitive language and procedures over time, contributors argued that many processes remain structurally constrained by institutional designs that privilege discrete events, visible violations and legally recognisable categories of harm.

Some speakers argued that gendered violence rarely occurs as isolated incidents detached from broader systems of inequality and social control. Rather, violence against women and marginalised communities was described as cumulative, relational and deeply embedded within political, social and economic structures long before periods of open conflict formally begin.

The Colombian experience provided one of the clearest examples of attempts to move beyond narrow understandings of gender harm. Contributors reflected on how Colombia's Truth Commission adopted an intersectional approach that integrated gender and race across its broader analysis of conflict rather than treating them as isolated thematic categories. Participants noted that this enabled the Commission to demonstrate how violence was shaped simultaneously by gender, ethnicity, displacement, land dispossession and structural inequality.

Several speakers argued that this approach represented an important departure from earlier transitional justice models that often treated sexual violence as secondary or supplementary to broader political violence. Instead, Colombia's experience illustrated how gendered harm can reveal deeper structures of exclusion and power operating throughout conflict itself.

Conversations returned to the idea that silence should not be interpreted as absence. One participant echoed that silence often represents what truth looks like when the social, political or personal costs of speaking remain too high. In different contexts, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence continue confronting stigma, social exclusion, fear of retaliation and institutional distrust, all of which shape whether experiences are disclosed publicly.

These concerns surfaced strongly in discussions on Kenya. The delegation from Kenya noted that the country's Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission explicitly included sexual and gender-based violence within its mandate and documented extensive patterns of abuse spanning colonial rule, political repression and post-election violence. Contributors reflected on how sexual violence was used as a tool of humiliation, punishment and social control across different periods of Kenyan history. Women and girls were disproportionately targeted, although men and boys also experienced forms of sexual violence that remained heavily underreported due to stigma and social taboo.

Participants noted that the Commission's findings demonstrated how violence against women did not emerge suddenly during electoral crises but was deeply connected to broader patriarchal structures, cultural practices and systems of inequality already embedded within society. Practices such as widow inheritance, bride price and gendered economic dependency were discussed as conditions shaping women's vulnerability to violence and exclusion.

At the same time, contributors acknowledged that even relatively progressive truth commissions continue struggling to capture the cumulative and ongoing nature of gendered harm fully. Transitional justice mechanisms are often structured around fixed timeframes and identifiable incidents, making it difficult to document forms of violence that unfold gradually across households, communities and generations.

Liberia's discussions reinforced these concerns. Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission documented widespread sexual violence committed by armed groups, state actors and militias during the civil war, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage. Women, children and men were all affected by these violations, while girls were frequently abducted into systems of exploitation and forced labour.

Participants noted on how Liberia's Commission made important efforts to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches, including the establishment of a Gender Unit and psychosocial support initiatives. However, implementation of many recommendations relating to survivor support, healthcare and reparations has remained limited. Several speakers stressed that survivors continue carrying the long-term physical, economic and psychological consequences of violence despite the existence of formal truth-seeking processes.

Discussions on Togo revealed similar patterns of under-documentation and institutional limitation. Although Togo's Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission acknowledged sexual violence as part of broader political repression, contributors noted that the issue remained comparatively marginal within the Commission's overall analysis. Limited reporting, stigma, lack of specialised procedures and

broader social attitudes surrounding sexual violence all contributed to the invisibility of many survivor experiences.

One speaker argued that these silences are often produced structurally by the design of transitional justice processes themselves. Survivors may be expected to testify publicly in environments where perpetrators remain present, protection measures are weak, or communities continue stigmatising disclosure. In such contexts, institutional procedures intended to recover truth can inadvertently reproduce silence and exclusion.

These concerns extended beyond Africa. Reflections on Taiwan demonstrated how transitional justice processes centred primarily on legal rehabilitation and archive recovery may overlook gendered experiences that remain insufficiently documented within official records. Although Taiwan's transitional justice mechanisms addressed wrongful imprisonment, political persecution and authoritarian repression during the White Terror period, contributors noted that gendered experiences of violence and exclusion remained comparatively underexplored within formal processes.

Several contributors therefore called for broader survivor-centred approaches capable of recognising violence that exceeds conventional legal categories and institutional timelines. Discussions stressed the importance of creating safer environments for testimony, integrating psychosocial support more fully into transitional justice processes and recognising the long-term relational impacts of violence on families and communities.

Overall, it was demonstrated that transitional justice processes cannot meaningfully address violence while remaining narrowly focused on individual events or formal legal violations alone. Gendered harm frequently exposes deeper social and structural conditions shaping exclusion, vulnerability and power across generations. Addressing such violence requires approaches capable of documenting abuse, but also of confronting the broader systems that allow it to persist.

Memory, Identity and Intergenerational Justice

The third cross-cutting theme was directed towards questions of memory, historical narration and the long-term transmission of violence across generations. Across multiple panels, participants resisted treating historical violence as confined neatly to the past. Instead, speakers argued that authoritarianism, colonialism, war and repression continue shaping institutions, political identities, education systems and social relations long after formal transitions occur.

Reflections from South Korea and Taiwan became especially important within these conversations, deepening discussions beyond institutional design and legal accountability toward broader questions of identity, belonging and humanisation. Contributors reflected on how unresolved histories become embedded within national narratives, public memory and everyday political life.

Perspectives from Korea centred heavily on the enduring legacy of division, militarisation and ideological conflict following the Korean War. Speakers reflected on how generations of South Koreans were socialised within systems that framed North Koreans primarily as enemies rather than fellow citizens separated through historical and geopolitical processes. Education systems, state narratives and militarised political cultures were described as shaping public understandings of identity and belonging across decades.

One contributor described how children in South Korea were encouraged to depict North Koreans as monstrous or inhuman through school activities and national competitions. These reflections illustrated how conflict becomes reproduced not only through institutions and borders, but through imagination itself. Participants returned to the argument that transitional justice requires more than factual clarification alone; it also requires recovering the humanity obscured through systems of militarisation, propaganda and political division.

These discussions resonated strongly with broader symposium reflections on intergenerational harm. Several speakers argued that societies emerging from violence frequently inherit systems of fear, silence and exclusion that continue shaping younger generations even where they did not directly experience the original conflict. Participants stressed the importance of memory work, education and public engagement in preventing historical violence from becoming normalised or erased over time.

Taiwan provided another important example of the long afterlife of authoritarianism within democratic societies. Discussions focused on Taiwan's ongoing efforts to confront the legacy of the White Terror period and the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang. Contributors reflected on how transitional justice in Taiwan remains deeply entangled within debates around public symbolism, memorialisation and political identity.

Attention was given to the continued public presence of authoritarian symbols, including statues, memorial halls and street names associated with Chiang Kai-shek. Participants described these symbols as active sites of political contestation reflecting unresolved questions about accountability, national identity and public memory. It was posited that memorialisation can function simultaneously as recognition for some communities and as continued trauma or exclusion for others.

Contributors also reflected on the limits of archive-centred transitional justice processes. While opening archives and overturning wrongful convictions remain important forms of legal rehabilitation, several participants noted that bureaucratic truth recovery alone cannot fully address emotional, cultural and intergenerational dimensions of historical violence. Questions emerged regarding how societies cultivate public understanding of past violence beyond institutional reports and official documentation.

To the issue of the long *durée* of colonial legacy, contributors reflected on how colonial violence, apartheid and authoritarian repression continue shaping governance systems, economic inequality and social relations across multiple countries. Delegates from Eastern and Southern stressed that colonialism should not be understood solely as a historical period that ended formally with independence. Rather, colonial structures continue influencing land ownership, political culture, institutional violence and economic exclusion in the present.

In Namibia, unresolved histories surrounding German colonial violence and genocide continue affecting contemporary political and social life. Contributors reflected on ongoing debates surrounding reparations, land redistribution and recognition, while also noting frustrations regarding the exclusion of directly affected communities from some negotiation processes.

It was emphasised that memory itself is political. Public narratives surrounding violence, resistance, liberation and victimhood are continually shaped through education systems, state institutions, memorials, media and political discourse. In this regard, transitional justice processes therefore

operate not only as mechanisms of accountability, as much as struggles over whose histories are recognised, preserved and transmitted publicly.

At the same time, several speakers cautioned against viewing memory solely through the lens of victimhood and trauma. Discussants, particularly delegates from South Africa and Korea, highlighted the importance of imagination, creativity and community-based forms of memorialisation in sustaining public engagement across generations. Music, storytelling, visual art, oral histories and grassroots memorial projects were described as important forms of resistance against historical erasure and political silence.

By the final sessions of the symposium, participants increasingly demonstrated that transitional justice is fundamentally concerned not only with how societies account for past violence, but also with how they imagine shared futures after violence. Questions of memory, education and intergenerational transmission therefore emerged as central to the long-term sustainability of democratic repair.

Comparative Reflections: What Carries Transitional Justice Forward?

As the symposium drew to a close, discussions shifted from individual country experiences toward broader comparative reflections on the future of transitional justice itself. While participants represented diverse historical, political and institutional contexts, several recurring tensions and lessons emerged consistently across the four days.

One of the clearest themes running throughout the symposium was the recognition that transitional justice processes remain deeply unfinished across many societies. Whether in South Africa, Liberia, Tunisia, Kenya, Uganda or Zimbabwe, participants showed the persistence of unresolved accountability, structural inequality, political resistance and intergenerational harm years after formal commissions concluded.

At the same time, contributors resisted framing these processes purely through the language of failure. Several speakers noted that truth commissions continue to matter precisely because they create public records, legitimise survivor experiences and establish moral and political reference points that remain significant long after institutional mandates expire. Truth commissions may not resolve violence fully, but they often alter the terrain upon which future struggles over memory, accountability and justice unfold.

In multiple discussions, participants revealed that transitional justice processes cannot survive through institutional design alone. Legal frameworks, commissions and constitutional protections remain important, but they are insufficient without sustained public ownership and civic participation. Tunisia's experience emerged as one of the symposium's clearest illustrations of this point. Despite extensive constitutional protections and specialised institutions, transitional justice became increasingly vulnerable once democratic conditions deteriorated and broader social embedding weakened.

This concern resonated strongly across the board as discussions returned to the sustainability of civil society itself. Contributors argued that transitional justice depends not only on state institutions, but also on constituencies capable of carrying public memory, survivor advocacy and democratic accountability forward across generations. Yet shrinking civic space, donor instability, leadership

exhaustion and institutional fragmentation increasingly threaten this capacity across multiple contexts.

It was posited that transitional justice must be understood not simply as a legal or institutional project, but as a long-term societal process requiring sustained civic infrastructure. Universities, survivor networks, grassroots organisations, artists, researchers, faith communities and youth movements were identified as critical actors in preserving public memory and sustaining democratic engagement over time.

Discussions also highlighted the importance of confronting structural inequality more directly within transitional justice frameworks. Participants explained that unresolved economic exclusion, land dispossession and racial or ethnic inequality continue shaping political instability and public distrust. Contributors argued that reconciliation processes which focus narrowly on symbolic recognition without engaging meaningfully with material inequality risk remaining politically fragile and socially incomplete.

Questions of gender and silence similarly exposed broader limitations within many transitional justice architectures. Participants noted that event-based and legally narrow frameworks often struggle to capture cumulative, relational and structural forms of violence experienced by women and marginalised communities. Several contributors therefore called for more survivor-centred and intersectional approaches capable of recognising violence beyond conventional legal categories.

At the same time, the symposium showed that transitional justice is ultimately concerned not only with institutions or legal accountability, but with questions of humanity, memory and social imagination. Discussions from Korea and Taiwan in particular expanded conversations beyond formal commissions toward broader reflections on militarisation, historical narration and the ways societies teach future generations to understand conflict, belonging and difference.

The linear understandings of transitions were a shared concern in the symposium. Democratic transition was shown to be uneven, contested and reversible rather than automatic or complete. Societies continue experiencing cycles of reform, erosion, resistance and authoritarian adaptation long after formal transitions occur. Transitional justice processes therefore remain vulnerable to broader political conditions and shifting power dynamics.

In spite of these challenges, contributors returned to the importance of continuing the work. Most speakers agreed that transitional justice should not be measured solely by whether commissions achieve full implementation immediately. Rather, its significance also lies in preserving public memory, legitimising survivor voices, creating historical records and sustaining political possibilities for future generations.

By the conclusion of the symposium, one of the strongest insights to emerge across discussions was that transitional justice survives only where there remains a constituency willing to continue carrying it forward. Institutions may weaken, governments may resist and political conditions may shift, but struggles over truth, memory and accountability persist across generations precisely because communities, survivors and civic actors continue refusing erasure and silence.

The Journey Continues

The TRC @ 30 Symposium demonstrated that transitional justice cannot be understood as a completed chapter within societies emerging from violence, authoritarianism and structural exclusion. The conversations held across the four days revealed transitional justice to be an ongoing and deeply contested process shaped by political struggle, civic resistance, institutional fragility and intergenerational memory.

Thirty years after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many of the questions that shaped the country's transition remain unresolved. Nonetheless, the symposium also demonstrated that South Africa's experience is far from unique. Across Africa and beyond, societies continue confronting impunity, delayed reparations, unresolved structural inequality and contested public memory years after formal commissions conclude.

At the same time, participants resisted simplistic narratives of either success or failure. Truth commissions were described as imperfect but important interventions capable of opening political and moral space even where implementation remains incomplete. While commissions alone cannot guarantee justice or democratic transformation, they often preserve historical records, legitimise survivor experiences and create foundations upon which future struggles for accountability continue to build.

One of the symposium's most important contributions was its insistence on lessons learnt in hindsight and comparative reflection aimed at setting the scene on future actions. By bringing together experiences from different countries and historical trajectories, participants were able to examine not only how transitional justice processes begin, but how they evolve, weaken, adapt or survive over time. This long-view perspective distinguished the symposium from many transitional justice engagements focused primarily on immediate post-conflict intervention.

Throughout, participants demonstrated that transitional justice processes remain vulnerable where they are not socially embedded. Legal frameworks, commissions and constitutional protections matter, but they cannot sustain themselves independently of broader democratic culture, civic participation and public ownership. Where societies fail to cultivate constituencies capable of carrying justice work forward, institutions become increasingly vulnerable to erosion, political capture and public disengagement.

The symposium also highlighted the growing pressures confronting civil society actors, survivor groups and justice movements in the multiple contexts represented. Shrinking civic space, leadership exhaustion, donor instability and institutional fatigue increasingly threaten the sustainability of long-term accountability work. Still, participants also reflected on the resilience of communities that continue preserving memory, supporting survivors and demanding justice despite these constraints.

Questions of economic inequality, gendered violence, colonial continuity and intergenerational harm further demonstrated that violence cannot be understood solely through discrete political events or periods of open conflict. Instead, historical injustice continues shaping contemporary governance systems, economic structures and social relations across generations. Transitional justice therefore requires approaches capable not only of documenting past violations, but also of confronting the structural conditions that allow exclusion and violence to persist.

Perhaps most significantly, the symposium demonstrated that transitional justice is ultimately concerned with how societies imagine living together after violence. Questions of memory,

recognition, accountability and repair are inseparable from broader struggles over democracy, belonging, public trust and shared humanity.

As the sun set on the symposium, there was broad consensus amongst the delegation that the work of justice does not end with institutional closure. It continues within communities, archives, classrooms, survivor movements, civil society organisations and public memory itself.

The journey, as several contributors observed across the symposium, continues only where there remains a constituency willing to carry it forward.