

## VICTIMS' STRUGGLES FOR RECOGNITION IN TJ CONTEXTS. SOCIAL RECOGNITION.

Victims of enforced disappearances in Colombia and El  
Salvador. The potential of social recognition channels.

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# The research project: The search for the victims of enforced disappearances in Colombia and El Salvador

- Financed by the Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS) – based at swisspeace (2019-March 2021)
- Multidisciplinary approach: legal and psycho-social
- Analysis of legal frameworks, mappings of search activities and semi-structured interviews

<https://www.swisspeace.ch/projects/research-project/connecting-legal-and-psychosocial-aspects-in-the-search-for-victims-of-enforced-disappearance-in-colombia-and-el-salvador>

<http://www.probusqueda.org.sv/caminos-busqueda/>

# Introduction

- Recognition as a form of justice in the case of serious human rights violations (Balde & Wemmers, 2021; De Greiff, 2012) – “reversing the imposition of victimhood” (Haldemann, 2008)
- Families and friends of disappeared individuals, as victims, face many obstacles to legal recognition (Rauschenbach et al., 2021); Lack of recognition: “the second wound of silence” (Govier, 2000)
- Recognition is not limited to the judicial realm and can also stem from other channels (Hoven & Scheibel, 2015; Rauschenbach et al., 2021)
- Social recognition understood as *“a victim's experience of positive reactions from society that show appreciation for the victim's unique state and acknowledge the victim's current difficult situation”* (Maercker & Müller, 2004)
- ED as a practice of state terror which destroys social fabric and the capacity for action (Kovras, 2017) and generates social stigmatization (Robins, 2013)
  - Acts of recognition “recall and reaffirm victims’ moral and civic worth” (Haldemann, 2008)
  - Role of the community and civil society as social capital in dealing with the emotional and economic consequences of ED

# Objectives of this paper

- Analysis of social recognition as it is perceived by victims who have been affected by ED, as well as civil society and institutional actors in contact with victims.
- What does it mean for victims who face a lack of state recognition?
- What is the role of social recognition channels ?

# Methodology

- Research conducted in Colombia and El Salvador between January 2019 and March 2021
- Initial phase of review of legal frameworks regarding the search of victims of ED in both countries
- 15 semi-structured interviews with families of the disappeared, civil society representatives and public officials involved in the search
  - Transcription, translation and anonymization
  - Inductive analysis

# Case studies

## Colombia

- Long-standing internal armed conflict
- ED used as a war strategy and political violence tool
- Different victims' and perpetrators profiles
- More than 180.000 cases
- ED victimhood is institutionally recognised

## El Salvador

- Authoritarian ruling tradition during most of the XX century
- Civil war between guerrilla forces and state's armed forces
- ED used as part of a counter-insurgency strategy
- More than 8,000 cases
- Legal recognition of ED victims is deficient and uncertain

# Lack of state recognition

- Impacts one's sense of dignity and humanity
- Obstacle to healing
- Revictimizing and disempowering
- Fear, stigmatization and rejection

# Impact one's sense of dignity and humanity

*“nobody ever looked for them and we feel that nobody is looking for them now”. (...) “of course he didn't care, because that body that was there was of no value, I mean, he wasn't a human being, he was worse [...] because he didn't have any identification.” 5CVA*

*“dignity was lost for this human being who surely had a story, who had some families who were sure to cry and who did not know where he was.” 5CVA*

- 3CVA and 5CVA: role of bureaucracy in contributing to insensitivity to individual suffering
- 4EVA referring to her sister's husband who had *“no right to be recognised”*.

# Obstacle to healing

- *“I'm a victim because you don't see that it's my children's dad and it's my husband who died? [...] But what about the pain that's left?” (1CV)*
- *“Neither I nor any of the disappearance victims I know receive any kind of comfort or spiritual or psychological help, no. It [ED] happens and you have to get over it and learn to live without it.” 3CVA*
- *“they feel a terror, and then in the end they have conformed to live like this and not look back, because the State has not given them a chance to be able to look for their family [...] I believe that one can learn to live with this pain and everything, but one does not forget that it is there, alive.” 14EV*

# Revictimizing and disempowering

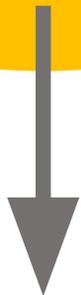
- *“My brother and I suffered in our own flesh and directly the humiliation, that pain. [...] And we have continued to be outraged. The mere fact of denying us at least recognition as a victim.” 11CV*
- *“The victim of forced disappearance is a pirinola, (a spinning top) who begins to roll until he gets tired and falls and is defeated by the System.” 3CVA*

# Fear, stigmatization and rejection

- *“I don't want any more rejection or more attitudes from people. That's why I try not to tell everyone, nobody, because it scares me.” 1CV*
- *“[...] well if we were pointed out, the whole family was pointed out, not only him, for example in this case not only my husband was pointed out, [...] The same situation forced us to suffer that inner pain and we couldn't even cry” 4EVA*
- *“why are you looking for them, for so long, they must be better off with another family, or maybe they died, [...] you don't even need them” when she was looking for her children everywhere, including “at the Red Cross, in the newspaper, on television”. 15EV*

# Social recognition and its potential channels

The family



Peer support

Psychological and socio-economic support

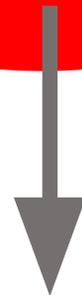
The community



Support for basic needs

Various informal networks of social capital

NGOs



Psycho-social support

Informational support

Support in the forensic investigations

The broader civil society



Countering the institutionalised silence

Awareness-raising

Expressing solidarity

Symbolic recognition

# Making private grief public and bolstering pressure for (effective) state recognition



# Concluding remarks

- Lack of recognition at various levels feeding into each other
- Important to support initiatives to increase social recognition, including in broader civil society
  - Victims: well-being, sense of dignity and bolsters their struggles
  - Counter state-level institutionalised lack of recognition
  - Help promote effective legal recognition by putting the issue on the political agenda
- Accounting for the role of other factors of marginalization (gender, socio-political disenfranchisement) which amplify the devastating psychosocial impact of ED (Robins, 2013)

Thank you for your attention!