

# Listening and Preparing the Society to Engage: The Case of the Colombian Truth Commission and Its Legacy Strategy

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## ABSTRACT

Reflections on the Colombian Truth Commission are timely to answer a question less explored in the transitional justice literature related to how transitional justice processes have been popularized and made accessible to the broader public, and moreover, how the various stakeholders have extended the fruits of transitional justice. In this note from the field, we offer our practitioner perspectives on the key enabling conditions and strategic moments in the development of the Commission's legacy strategy that contributed to these outcomes. We examine how the Commission's ethical and political framing of the listening exercises and its overall institutional structure led to a long-term peacebuilding project that continues to mobilize today through the work of the *Trabajo en red con aliados* or the Network of Allies. We unpack the key factors that foster ongoing mobilization of civil society and local government actors engaged in debating, implementing and grappling with the recommendations of the final report. This note provides new information for the debate about the value of networks and partnerships related to facing the truth and moving towards non-recurrence in transitional justice endeavors.

**KEYWORDS:** Legacy strategy, networks, reconciliation, transitional justice, truth commission, truth-seeking

## BACKGROUND

'How are you going to ensure that it is not "just another day in Colombia" when you deliver the final [Commission] report?'

These were the words of John Paul Lederach<sup>1</sup> during a public lecture at the National University of Colombia in early 2019 when the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la*

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul Lederach, professor emeritus of international peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame, has extensive peacebuilding engagement throughout Colombia and played a key advisory role in the peace negotiations.

*Convivencia y la No Repetición* (Commission for Truth, Coexistence and Non-Recurrence, hereafter referred to as the Commission) was just beginning its mandate. Many Commission staff, including its president, Francisco de Roux, attended that lecture. Lederach, one of two international members of the advisory board to the Commission, noticed a lack of astonishment in Colombian society when listening to the perplexing human suffering, damages and overall consequences of five decades of internal armed conflict. He perceived that Colombian society had somehow normalized these numbers – over 9.5 million victims of the armed conflict<sup>2</sup> – in their daily lives. Amid Colombia's divided society, Lederach motivated the audience to think of meaningful ways to increase society's capacity to listen and overcome their indifference towards the impact of this long-lasting armed conflict.

This question landed on fertile ground within the Commission. A significant part of the staff had experience working in peacemaking and peacebuilding, with many members having worked closely with both delegations that brought forward the peace agreement signed in 2016 between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The unexpected results of the referendum in 2016, when the peace agreement was publicly rejected by a slight margin, deeply impacted the Commission staff.<sup>3</sup> The referendum was a clear sign of the political polarization that was occurring at that moment in Colombia.<sup>4</sup> Many staff believed that releasing the Commission's final report could be a second chance to engage Colombian society in a public discussion regarding the past, present and future, and to reestablish a legitimate effort for reconciliation within the country.

## INTRODUCTION

A question under-explored in the transitional justice literature on Colombia is: in what ways and to what extent have transitional justice processes been popularized and made accessible to the broader public? And, relatedly, how have local governments, civil society groups, religious institutions, educational institutions and others applied or extended the fruits of transitional justice processes and projects? At the second anniversary of the Commission's final report release in June 2024, we witness the ongoing mobilization of civil society and local government actors engaged in debating, implementing and grappling with the final report's recommendations. Why is this happening?

This note from the field shares the insight and reflections from our experiences as an internal staff member and an external ally to the Commission. As a permanent Advisor to the President of the Colombian Commission and the Director of Partnerships and Alliances, and a Senior Director of Peacebuilding at a philanthropic organization supporting inclusive peace processes, we both actively engaged in supporting the creation and implementation of the Commission's legacy strategy.<sup>5</sup> Given our different positionalities, we pull out a story that illuminates a larger contribution to the transitional justice sector: how participatory and collective approaches implemented throughout the Commission's mandate strongly contributed to *lo intangible* or

<sup>2</sup> 'Victimas Conflicto Armado Infografía,' *Unidad para las Víctimas*, <https://cifras.unidadvictimas.gov.co/Cifras/#!/infografia> (accessed 1 June 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Despite the peace agreement later being approved by congress on 24 November 2016, the impact of the 'No' campaign on the transitional justice process and on the increase of polarization in the country is well argued in Camilo Ramírez-Gutiérrez and Daniel R. Quiroga-Villamarín, 'Shredded: Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace in an Increasingly Illiberal Context of Misinformation and Backlash,' *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 20(1) (2022): 139–166. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijc/mqac002>.

<sup>4</sup> Gwen Burnyeat, 'Reverberations: Political Identity Boundaries after the Colombian Peace Referendum,' *Journal of Language and Politics* 23(5) (2024): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.24099.bur>.

<sup>5</sup> We connected over how to talk about the conflict with our young children, whom we were raising during this historical moment. Out of a mutual desire to create a better life for our kids, we strove to imagine a new future where the next generation could live in peace.

the intangible as part of the larger truth-seeking process of the Commission.<sup>6</sup> We bring critical insight into the Commission's legacy strategy<sup>7</sup> and offer practitioners' perspectives on key moments throughout the mandate that led to the development and implementation of this strategy during and beyond the Commission's mandate. We offer these observations humbly as input into the ongoing debate and growing knowledge on how to assess and evaluate the impact, effects and value of transitional justice.<sup>8</sup> Our contribution lends itself as new information for the debate about the value of networks and partnerships related to facing the truth and moving towards non-recurrence.<sup>9</sup>

First, we highlight the dissemination of the final report and key outcomes in the first two years since the completion of the Commission's mandate. Next, we focus on key enabling conditions to achieve mass ongoing mobilization, specifically highlighting the Commission's leadership approach, listening objectives and organizational structure. Then, we share insights from how the legacy strategy came about, first implicitly, then explicitly in the middle of the Commission's tenure, influencing its networking until its end. We conclude with some reflections on the internal and external enabling conditions for popularization after truth commission processes.

## THE AFTERLIFE OF THE COLOMBIAN COMMISSION: COLLABORATIVE ACTIONS BY ALLIES

Thirty months after Lederach's motivating speech, the Commission officially presented its final report on 28 June 2022, with a national broadcast, thus closing a historic step in the transitional justice process between the Colombian government and FARC.<sup>10</sup> The 10-volume, over 10,000-page final report was officially handed over to the newly elected left-wing government led by President Gustavo Petro, elected just two weeks before, representing a new political wave in Colombia. The final report was not only the 10 investigative volumes co-signed by the Commissioners but also an expansive set of materials, including the audiovisual and written testimonies that expand, enrich and contextualize the storytelling of the victims and perpetrators. Between July and August 2022, the Commission disseminated its report via massive communication platforms, including TV shows, radio and podcasts, and simultaneously conducted regional tours visiting 44 cities in Colombia, plus three international tours visiting 11 countries.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This intangible legacy refers to the lived experiences that victims, perpetrators and society in general had while participating in the truth-seeking processes, and how this experience will be remembered throughout their lives.

<sup>7</sup> The Commission was conscious that other truth commissions worldwide had failed in the post-report phase. Therefore, it created a legacy strategy to ensure that the final report did not stay on paper but would have a wider impact in helping society move toward a more peaceful future. For more research on the impact of truth commissions post mandate, see Elin Skaar, 'Transitional Justice for Human Rights: The Legacy and Future of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions,' in *International Human Rights Institutions, Tribunals, and Courts*, ed. Gerd Oberleitner (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 1–21. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5206-4\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5206-4_15).

<sup>8</sup> The call for complexity-aware measurement for transitional justice is outlined in Paul Gready and Simon Robins, 'Transitional Justice and Theories of Change: Towards Evaluation as Understanding,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 14(2) (2020): 280–299. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijaa008>; also for criticisms of the limitation of quantitative, see Brandon Stewart and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 'The Quantitative Turn in Transitional Justice Research: What Have We Learned about Impact?' *Transitional Justice Review* 1(5) (2017): 97–133.

<sup>9</sup> Destrooper explores an eco-system approach to transitional justice, pointing to the added value of networks and partnerships for dissemination, focusing on the Philippines case, and provides a compelling argument to be explored in further research related to the Colombia legacy strategy, especially as it relates to contexts characterized by complex and multi-dimensional violence. See Tine Destrooper, 'Remembering Martial Law: An Eco-System of Truth Initiatives and the Emergence of Narrative Documentation in the Philippines,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 17(3) (2023): 370–387. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijad025>.

<sup>10</sup> See Article 13.8 outlining the legal mandate of the Commission created under Decree 588 of 2017, <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=80633> (accessed 30 May 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Silvia Rodríguez Corredor, '¿Cómo está llegando el Informe final de la Comisión de la Verdad a las regiones y al mundo?' *El Espectador*, 25 July 2022, <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/paz-y-memoria/la-comision-de-la-verdad-presenta-informe-en-los-territorios-y-en-el-extranjero/> (accessed May 30, 2024).

Also during this period, the Commission officially kicked off the Follow-up and Monitoring Committee, a unique feature of the Commission's post-mandate efforts that resulted from civil society advocating for this monitoring body during the peace negotiations in Havana.<sup>12</sup>

Alongside the official report, the Commission launched the Transmedia, a digital platform containing more than 200,000 files related to the Commission's work, including digitized documents, audiovisual materials, anonymized testimonies and contextual knowledge.<sup>13</sup> This innovative platform encapsulates a holistic view of the myriad efforts that the Commission, victims, ex-combatants, public and private institutions, social organizations and international actors engaged in throughout the Commission's mandate. This exemplifies what the Commission understood as *el legado intangible* or the intangible legacy, which is the ways that victims, perpetrators and society in general perceived and would remember the processes led by the Commission at territorial, national and international levels. Rather than focus only on the tangible product (the final report), the intangible legacy relates to the experience people had while contributing to or taking part in the truth-seeking processes, which will accompany them throughout their lives. Olga Lucía Lozano, the Director of the Digital Platform Project, so aptly captured this approach:

In a country like Colombia, where everyone must take a side for something, this [Transmedia] platform takes the side of life, the right to live, the right to be. Its main objective is to remove any prejudice that people may have in their heads [about the armed conflict]; on this platform, we care about everyone's pain, but not to recast it throughout the narrative, but to reshape the future. That is why this is a *peace project*.<sup>14</sup>

The Commission believed that to influence the goal of non-recurrence, this whole endeavor needed to continue as a collective process of truth-telling over time.<sup>15</sup> Many stakeholders who actively participated in the truth-telling process would continue working for peace and reconciliation in Colombia beyond the Commission's period; therefore, their role was crucial in the aftermath. The Commission recognized that the allies – the civil society organizations, universities, public institutions and international actors, among others – were ‘... agents of change and advocacy whose mandate or agenda is to advance peacebuilding and promote negotiated solutions to the armed confrontation in the country’ and have the ‘capacity, commitment, and autonomy for networking.’<sup>16</sup> During its mandate, the Commission engaged these allies to ensure maximum participation and engagement in both the truth-seeking and legacy phases of its work in all corners of the country. Thus, the allies’ participation and mobilization became an

<sup>12</sup> ‘La Comisión de la Verdad dejó instalado el Comité de Seguimiento y Monitoreo de sus recomendaciones,’ *Plataforma Transmedia Hay Futuro Si Hay Verdad*, 28 June 2022, <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/la-comision-de-la-verdad-dejo-instalado-el-comite-de-seguimiento-y-monitoreo-de-sus-recomendaciones> (accessed 30 September 2024).

<sup>13</sup> The Transmedia platform Hay Futuro Si Hay Verdad (hereafter referred to as Transmedia, available at [www.comisiondelaverdad.co](http://www.comisiondelaverdad.co)) has had more than 1,820,000 users since its launch on 28 June 2022, equivalent to approximately 2,600 daily users from around the world. Through a license signed between the Commission and the University of Notre Dame, an ally during its mandate, Transmedia will remain online for perpetuity, with funding by one of the international allies (accessed 30 May 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Emphasis added by authors to highlight the importance of the larger peacebuilding effort the Commission takes part in. ‘Introducción: La Serie, la Plataforma y la Declaración a la PAZ GRANDE’ (webinar from Legacy Project Transmedia Series, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 19 January 2024), <https://kroc.nd.edu/research/the-legacy-project/the-truth-commissions-transmedia-platform—an-open-online-learn-to-navigate-series/>.

<sup>15</sup> Bakiner argues that human rights organizations and victims’ groups sustain post-commission pressure and make up for the barriers of the truth commission’s limited mandate. See Onur Bakiner, ‘Truth Commission Impact: An Assessment of How Commissions Influence Politics and Society,’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 8 (1) (2014): 30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijt025>.

<sup>16</sup> The partnership approach of the Commission was based on these allies. ‘El Legado,’ *Plataforma Transmedia Hay Futuro Si Hay Verdad*, 18 November 2021, 37, <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/la-narrativa-del-legado> (accessed 10 May 2024).

integral part of the Commission's legacy strategy, which included a specific recommendation for non-recurrence related to engaging with and disseminating the final report.<sup>17</sup>

When the Commission officially ended its mandate in August 2022, these allies led efforts along with the new administrations at national and territorial levels, and with former Commission staff from their new positions.<sup>18</sup> The *Trabajo en red con aliados* (Network of Allies) is a decentralized, autonomous and ad-hoc emerging network of allies made up of almost 5,000 civil society organizations (including victim and ex-combatant organizations), public institutions, universities and schools, international actors, public, private and community media, the private sector, religious institutions and political parties that have registered over 4,400 initiatives concerning the dissemination of the report and the recommendations of the Commission.<sup>19</sup> This network has established 10 active territorial networks, three thematic committees, as well as the Transnational Volunteer Service created by youth around the country that continues to mobilize the younger generation on the legacy of the Commission, also in constant dialogue with the Follow-Up and Monitoring Committee. These allies promote diverse yet mutually reinforcing collaborative actions, from educational and artistic campaigns<sup>20</sup> in schools and universities to engagement with local authorities and territorial planning processes to include the recommendations in their regional development plans.<sup>21</sup> We, and others like the Follow-up and Monitoring Committee, are currently observing that 'the Commission's legacy is not static' but is very much active.<sup>22</sup>

## ENABLING CONDITIONS: LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR POST-COMMISSION MOBILIZATION

The foundation for the dissemination efforts and the uptake by civil society and state institutions after the end of the Commission's mandate comes from various enabling conditions. The President of the Commission steered the staff to think beyond the limits of the Commission as a public institution by reminding them that their mandate 'is bigger than all of us put together.'<sup>23</sup> He fostered an ethical and moral imperative that shaped the staff's disposition toward a collective and collaborative attitude: the entire Commission and all its efforts were devoted to contributing to the victim's right to truth. Francisco de Roux reminded staff that the Commission was written into the peace agreement thanks to the permanent engagement and deep suffering of civil society, thus highlighting that truth-seeking and non-recurrence neither began nor ends with its staff and outreach.<sup>24</sup> Since the Commission's mandate was just three years (extended

<sup>17</sup> The Commission recommended to the different social, private and public actors 'to know the legacy of the Truth Commission, disseminate it and give it continuity at territorial, national and international levels according to their duties, objectives and specific missions and rely on it to implement the recommendations made in this Report.' See Recommendation #67 in *Hallazgos y Recomendaciones de la Comisión de la Verdad de Colombia* (Bogotá: Comisión de la Verdad, 2022), (2), 728, ISBN 978628-7590-20-5.

<sup>18</sup> The creation of this networked structure to carry on long-term permanent societal discussion and debate for non-recurrence is what Nickson and Braithwaite call an architecture of permanence. Ray Nickson and John Braithwaite, 'Deeper, Broader, Longer Transitional Justice,' *European Journal of Criminology* 11(4) (2014): 445–463. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370813505954>.

<sup>19</sup> All numbers were provided through personal communication with the Committee of Communications and the authors. These numbers were also shared in 'Avances: Trabajo en Red de aliados y Seremos' (webinar from the Network of Allies, 3 October 2024), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ckSUDSsJx9zFpFya-ZFcjRugr21Cz7Cw/view>.

<sup>20</sup> 'Todo lo que necesita saber sobre la "Escuela Abraza la Verdad" en los colegios de la ciudad,' *Secretaría de Educación*, 19 August 2022, [https://www.educacionbogota.edu.co/portal\\_institucional/noticia/todo-lo-que-necesita-saber-sobre-la-escuela-abraza-la-verdad-en-los-colegios-de-la-ciudad](https://www.educacionbogota.edu.co/portal_institucional/noticia/todo-lo-que-necesita-saber-sobre-la-escuela-abraza-la-verdad-en-los-colegios-de-la-ciudad) (accessed 20 May 2024).

<sup>21</sup> 'Boletín: Verdad en Acción No. 3,' *Plataforma Seremos*, March 2024, [https://www.seremos.co/vea\\_comites/la-verdad-sigue-caminando/](https://www.seremos.co/vea_comites/la-verdad-sigue-caminando/) (accessed 10 May 2024).

<sup>22</sup> 'Comité de Seguimiento y Monitoreo, 'Segundo Informe sobre el Proceso de Implementación de las Recomendaciones formuladas por la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad,' June 2024, 46, <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/lo-que-sigue-comite-de-seguimiento> (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Francisco de Roux shared this during the plenary and team sessions. Personal notes of the authors (accessed 15 May 2024).

<sup>24</sup> The Commissioners themselves were elected with nominations from civil society movements, and many of them had a history of engagement in those sectors. 'La Comisión de la Verdad articula su trabajo con iniciativas de la sociedad civil y los cooperantes internacionales que las apoyan,' *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la*



by seven months due to the Covid-19 pandemic), Francisco de Roux insisted that staff did not have the time to start from zero; instead, the team was encouraged to join efforts with those who already had the know-how. Ultimately, the Commissioners and President called on staff to center victims through a networked approach of allies, who had the legitimacy and connections with victims and a wide range of stakeholders in the territories.<sup>25</sup>

The Commission's two-track listening approach was another fundamental enabling condition for social ownership. On the one hand, there was private listening, via semi-structured interviews – individual and collective, many of which were collected as life stories. This first track was a direct and private interaction between the person (or collective) who was sharing their testimony and the Commission staff.<sup>26</sup> For the Commission, it was clear that in addition to gathering a significant number of testimonies for drafting the report, the sharing of the testimonies had to be meaningful for the people themselves – especially the victims – and those listening to it. Thus, the second pathway was a public 'social dialogue track' that facilitated a larger engagement with society in general. The approach involved victims speaking publicly to the Commission, and the Commission recognizing publicly their dignity and resistance. Progressively over the mandate, the responsible armed actors also spoke to the Commission, faced the victims and the country, acknowledged responsibility and in many cases also faced their own families. This allowed broader society to listen directly to the testimonies of the armed conflict and to be part, even if indirectly, of this truth-telling process.

In addition to the Commission's leadership that centered on the victims and directed the staff to leverage the diverse networks of allies, the Commission knew that its internal structure and processes needed to support this political perspective, and that specific teams, methodologies and financial resources were needed. Over 3,000 people worked as part of the Commission, structured through 11 Commissioners and 24 working teams.<sup>27</sup> To prepare for the two-track listening approach, the Commission opened 28 Truth Houses around the country and worked with victims and allies in 24 countries around the world to include the perspectives of the substantial exiled and diasporic population. The complex team structure required countless coordination efforts as the heterogeneity within the Commission led, in many cases, to longer deliberation and coordination processes, which created delays. The staff faced frequent tensions among central and regional teams, or between commissioners, directors and administrative teams, including those working with international outreach, over how to centralize operations and distribute human resources.

Ultimately, these frictions made way for several innovations. For example, the internal discussions and team-by-team engagements led to a broad arts and culture strategy, a networked approach with Colombians in exile and contemporary collaborative research projects with international actors across sectors. Also, the internal Commission debates led to the creation of a robust internal psychosocial approach for staff, as well as support for victims, perpetrators and witnesses, the establishment of a Human Rights Archive officially included at the UNESCO Memory of the World Program for Latin America<sup>28</sup> and nationally and regionally tailored public

No Repetición, 19 February 2019, <https://web.comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/la-comision-de-la-verdad-articula-su-trabajo-con-organizaciones-sociales-y-cooperantes-internacionales> (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>25</sup> 'Así es el trabajo de la Comisión de la Verdad con sus aliados,' *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición*, <https://web.comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/asi-es-el-trabajo-de-la-comision-de-la-verdad-con-sus-aliados> (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Allies abroad took testimonies for the Commission (with training), with the exiled population, certain women's groups and LGBTQI+ communities.

<sup>27</sup> A full list of the names of people who worked for the Commission can be found at: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/listado-de-colaboradores-comision-de-la-verdad-2018-2022> (accessed 30 May 2024).

<sup>28</sup> 'Fondo documental de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (CEV),' UNESCO, 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/es/memory-world/lac/documentary-fund-commission-clarification-truth-coexistence-and-non-repetition-cev> (accessed 14 September 2024).

communications and pedagogy strategies.<sup>29</sup> The continued natural emergence of collaborative approaches with regional and cross-sector civil society networks was accelerated due to Covid-19. The unexpected pandemic forced the Commission staff into a catalytic moment in its mandate that shaped its legacy strategy: new technologies and social media played a strategic communication role in disseminating the report and allowed the digital Transmedia platform to be designed simultaneously for a holistic truth-seeking process. Staff used technology and cellphone networks to continue their work, all while laying the foundation for a networked approach with allies to continue its legacy after the end of its mandate.

## MAKING THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT: THE COMMISSION'S LEGACY STRATEGY

By the end of 2021, when most staff were focused on finalizing the report and the digital platform, a small group of team members, including a Commissioner, devoted themselves to the rollout of the legacy strategy. The allies and the Commission's advisory board asked questions about how to prepare society to listen to the findings of the Commission. Suddenly, almost 18 months later, the Commission was faced with Lederach's initial question. These allies' persistence as well as their commitment to mobilize in the aftermath pushed the Commission to listen to their genuine questions and perspectives and make an additional effort to answer them through the legacy strategy. After numerous internal deliberations, the Commission's Legacy strategy was conceptualized into three pillars: what, how and who. *What* the Commission delivered was the final report with its 10 volumes, the findings, the recommendations for non-repetition, the methodologies, testimonies, events and guidelines. *How* the Commission would deliver it and how the society could access it in the aftermath were through the digital platform-Transmedia, the complete Archive and the Exhibition.<sup>30</sup> *Who* would disseminate it were the Follow-up and Monitoring Committee and the allies, along with the official integration into the two other transitional justice institutions (the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons (UBPD)) created by the 2016 peace agreement.<sup>31</sup>

At this point of its mandate, the Commission was the convener of the allies who accompanied the Commission's mandate according to their own mandates and thematic focuses. But when thinking about the aftermath, it was essential to strengthen the connection among thousands of allies without the Commission being at the center. Amid the Commission's tight deadlines and without extra financial resources or explicit role descriptions, disparate members of the Commission offered to weave and connect allies for a 'Permanent National Dialogue'.<sup>32</sup> An internal team from the presidency of the Commission collected and unified the multiple contacts and connections of allies from across the Commission's teams and created a database to understand and promote potential partnerships and synergies. The result in early 2022 was a list of 3,000 strategic allies and a panoramic view of their

<sup>29</sup> For more information about these innovative approaches, see: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/como-lo-hicimos/caja-de-herramientas>; <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/activaciones-artisticas-y-culturales> and <https://archivo.comisiondelaverdad.co/estrategia-nacional-de-comunicaciones> (accessed 30 September 2024).

<sup>30</sup> The JEP and the National Archive host and manage the complete Archive that resulted from the Commission's work and that remains a pillar for victims' right to the truth. To access the full Archive details, see: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/legado-0>. The Exhibition 'Hay Futuro Si Hay Verdad' holds the same name as the report. It was launched in February 2024 with the support of the German Embassy and after six months had over 30,000 visitors. Its online version can be found at: [www.hayfuturosihayverdad.co](http://www.hayfuturosihayverdad.co) (accessed 30 September 2024).

<sup>31</sup> The Integral System for Transitional Justice defined in the peace agreement represents a holistic and innovative effort to center victim's rights through the creation of three public entities, with complementary mandates: the Commission, the JEP and the UBPD. See more background here: <https://bapp.com.co/en/conversations-phase/victims/#victims> (accessed 30 September 2024).

<sup>32</sup> This refers to the tagline 'UnaConversacionPermanentePaís' from the allies to mobilize jointly for a society-at-large dialogue with the findings and recommendations of the Commission.

locations, types of institutions and audiences with whom they worked.<sup>33</sup> The Commission then took two strategic steps to prepare the allies for ownership of the legacy strategy. First, the Commission publicly recognized the allies and their contributions to the Commission and invited the allies to speak about the legacy of the Commission from their perspectives.<sup>34</sup> Second, the Commission began a direct, constant and unified communication strategy with the allies to actively involve them in the exit strategy of the Commission.

The initiative called 'Friday Talks with Allies' was the most comprehensive and systematic example of the Commission's direct communication strategy. During the last six months of the mandate, the Commission held 20 sessions with allies in which they shared the processes and results of the overall methodology, weaving together the work that the various allies engaged in based on their location in Colombia and their organizational vision.<sup>35</sup> Allies provided key feedback during these conversations, strengthening the civil society's social ownership. Moreover, the active distribution of primary materials, including an official logo for the legacy and allies, equipped allies with resources to inform and disseminate among their audiences. One of these sessions sparked the creation of a network platform called Seremos ('We Will Be' in English), which led to various allies committing to financially support the ongoing mobilization and coordination across the allies, ensuring this network could continue post mandate.<sup>36</sup> The periodic engagements helped position a collective narrative about the legacy of the Commission in public spaces regionally, nationally and internationally, leveraging traditional and social media. With this, the Commission made a political decision to highlight a new approach to public service for peace: building together and in permanent dialogue with external social, public and private stakeholders.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION: LOOKING BACK TO IMAGINE A NEW FUTURE

This special issue on the afterlives of transitional justice is an opportunity to unpack an ongoing transitional justice process in Colombia, specifically looking at the legacy of the Commission. When we came together in 2024 to reflect and write together, we asked ourselves: How and why do so many networked initiatives and partnerships still exist? What can we learn from how the Commission was set up and operated that sheds light on the current mobilization and accessibility of the ongoing implementation of the Commission recommendations? While we acknowledge there is still much to evaluate about the Colombian Commission and its impact, what we offered in this note is our practitioner perspectives on the key enabling conditions and strategic moments in developing the legacy strategy that contributed to these outcomes. We view the Commission's ethical and political posture of the listening exercises and its structure and overall institutional spirit of long-term peacebuilding as innovative and core to this work. Moreover, we found that by building on the existing networks of peacebuilding and human

<sup>33</sup> 'Con quién lo hicimos,' *Plataforma Transmedia Hay Futuro Si Hay Verdad*, <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/con-quien-lo-hicimos-0> (accessed 1 June 2024).

<sup>34</sup> For an example video broadcasted during the last national accountability session of the Commission, see: Comisión de la Verdad, 'Aliados de La Comisión: Compromiso Con El Legado,' 17 March 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpo\\_A6Sgxxk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpo_A6Sgxxk) (accessed 30 September 2024).

<sup>35</sup> This drive contains the information shared and is permanently updated by Network of Allies: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1yOnXYNa42N6n8KSBBF4iqetoOVyRcfxp?usp=share\\_linkhttps://www.seremos.co/](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1yOnXYNa42N6n8KSBBF4iqetoOVyRcfxp?usp=share_linkhttps://www.seremos.co/) (accessed 30 May 2024).

<sup>36</sup> Through various discussions with other international allies and Colombian civil society organizations, Humanity United supported La Paz Querida, a civil society organization, to host the technical secretariat for the Network of Allies through the Seremos platform, [www.seremos.co](http://www.seremos.co) (accessed 30 September 2024).

<sup>37</sup> As Alberto Heredia, Executive Director of La Paz Querida (LPQ), which hosts the secretariat of the Network of Allies, stated, 'There are very few examples of the institution being the one that reaches out to civil society. That paradigm shift led to a change in attitude: people now feel like the institution is theirs,' in 'The Legacy for Colombia and Transitional Justice Globally: Recent Reflections from the Voices of Practical and Academic Experts' (Bogotá: German-Colombian Peace Institute, 7 August 2022), 78.



rights organizations and institutions around the country and internationally, the Commission established a collective sense of ownership of the truth-telling process.<sup>38</sup>

We have observed that all these popularization steps and accomplishments were possible because of the diversity of external and internal, planned and unplanned factors that the Commission connected and addressed. This does not mean the steps to achieve them were linear or clear-cut. Indeed, the various levels of civil society had to work collaboratively with private and public stakeholders to implement concrete and collective actions. Various national and international allies believed in the Commission's ethical and political stance to have a victim-centered approach and contribute to peacebuilding from a long-term perspective, and they had to be engaged and meaningfully involved.

However, we also acknowledge the tense polarization that continues in the country. Many conversations and much discernment must still happen with current and future generations around the work of the Commission. The Commission worked with a legitimacy deficit after the failed referendum in 2016, and under a President whose political party openly opposed the peace agreement, all while facing the global Covid-19 pandemic. In short, these factors limited its effective engagement with certain sectors of society. That is why, during its dissemination period, the Commission not only shared how the final report was constructed but openly invited society to read, discuss and question the findings and recommendations of this ethical, historical and political truth through diverse and inclusive conversations.

Therefore, a wider and systematic national debate about the deep structural and cultural changes necessary to guarantee non-recurrence is still very much needed. Future research and evaluation efforts could further analyze whether the legacy of the Commission has impacted this outcome and to what extent. That research should take into consideration the posture of the Commission to make truth a public good and a matter of collective interest. It should examine the value of the intangible legacy that continues to motivate ongoing collective action toward peace in Colombia. We see this in the continual organizing of the *Trabajo en red con aliados* and the constant advocacy to implement the recommendations across all sectors of society, supporting the role of the Follow-Up and Monitoring Committee. We believe that engaging a wider range of stakeholders must happen and is the future. With the continual mobilization of allies and the specific contributions to a judicial and a humanitarian truth – related to the specific mandates of both the JEP and the UBPd – we believe the ongoing truth-seeking process in Colombia will endure.

<sup>38</sup> We want to highlight that the newly elected president publicly supported the report and its recommendations, leading to an overwhelming sense of support in the political environment for the allies and motivating the continuation of actions and commitment to implement and grapple with the recommendations of the Commission. Armando Neira, 'Gustavo Petro Sobre El Informe Final de La Comisión de La Verdad,' *El Tiempo*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/gobierno/gustavo-petro-sobre-el-informe-final-de-la-comision-de-la-verdad-683347> (accessed May 30, 2024).