**2021-16 T\_RL – additional text sent with ‘Abstract Jake Lynch’ – October 2021 – TARGET**

**Kintsugi as a metaphor for the work of dealing with the past**

The practice of Kintsugi embodies a fitting metaphor for dealing with ruptures in the past. This art form was developed 500 years ago in line with the aesthetic principles of Wabi Sabi (Zen buddhism). Its aim is to expose the beauty that is imperfect and hidden.

The shards of a vase broken in the past are pieced together again using urushi lacquer mixed with a fine powder of gold, silver or platinum.

In this way, wounds from the past are not only made visible and closed, figuratively speaking, but are also recognised and celebrated as being valuable for life in the future.

Instead of postulating a return to some supposedly original condition, the newly reconstructed vase now delights us with its beautiful imperfection and tells us about its past by means of its gilt scars.

Similarly, nothing can be undone in dealing with violence experienced in past armed conflicts, with their paths of development and configurations of causality – there is no way of returning to “normality”. As in conflict transformation in general, it is more about finding life-affirming forms that enable the affected individuals and communities, as they interact with one another, to deal more constructively with the political consequences and deep wounds. Inherent to experiences of past conflict are lessons learned, new perspectives, creative approaches to the design of peace strategies, and practical measures.

**Working with the past as an instrument of peace**

A review of the progress made to date across the globe in the application of dealing with the past (DwP) processes as an instrument of engagement for peace illustrates the relatively short time it has taken for this field of activity to become established.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Not only have discussions and experiences within the area of DwP and transitional justice (JP) led to a political shift in the norms of international peace policy as they have been integrated into [concepts](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiIr5Hp4M7wAhVSh-AKHcflAX8QFjAAegQIAxAD&url=https%3A%2F%2Farchivesproject.swisspeace.ch%2Ffileadmin%2Fuser_upload%2Farchivesproject%2FPublications%2FDwP_Conceptual_Framework_October2012.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2UebDi3B1daORrVBIbGdVT) and international resolutions, among other things – they have also been materialised in the everyday practice of conflict transformation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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**Impulses for the work of dealing with the past**

Admittedly, the lines of engagement, programs and projects that substantially shape the field of dealing with the past can look very state-centric and fixated with institutions. This creates at least three problems in practice:

 The impact of DwP instruments is [determined](https://www.ictj.org/justice-mosaics) by the societal contexts in which they are deployed. In some “post-authoritarian” transition processes, the institutional prerequisites for the successful deployment of DwP measures, such as a relatively functional justice system and criminal justice authorities, still exist. In some countries that have seen long armed conflicts, the functionality of these administrative structures has been so eroded that they are no longer capable of producing useful outcomes, and in some cases they no longer exist.

Frequently in cases of conflict transformation the focus is on cooperation with institutions in the hope that this will enable political instruments of DwP to be established in a more sustainable and functional way. Yet observations reveal that political appropriation works against this strategy. In these such newly created institutions, charged as they are with dealing with the past, changes of personnel at regular intervals and directive rulings from above are enough to demolish previous successes bit by bit. This can be seen in the work of courts, truth commissions, ministries, memory centres, museums and other institutions.

Against this background it is important to underline that a plethora of impulses for DwP can be found, not in state institutions but in civil society, academic circles and active local communities. These sources constitute a potential for strengthening DwP processes that remains unutilised whenever there is an overemphasis on state actors in a cooperation on DwP policy and processes.

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The significance of memory work as an important component of conflict transformation, and thus of peacebuilding, must not be reduced to that of a cross-sectoral issue. The risk is too great that as a result, memory work would be given a lower priority in political decision-making processes. Memory work should instead be defined as a dedicated field of activity within DwP and TJ, and should therefore be included explicitly in the allocation of resources, to the same degree as the other arenas of peacebuilding activity.

1. Pablo de Greiff, former UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, elaborated on this fact in a guest lecture held in 2019 at New York University in New York (https://www.law.nyu.edu/news/emilio-mignone-lecture-transitional-justice-pablo-de-greiff). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although there are conceptual differences between them, the terms “dealing with the past” (DwP) and “transitional justice” (TJ) will be treated as one from here on for purposes of clarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)