THE COMMUNITY MEMORIALISATION PROJECT:
MEMORIALISATION FOR NON-RECURRENCE OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

Radhika Hettiarachchi
August 2018

The Community Memorialisation Project, Sri Lanka

THE COMMUNITY MEMORIALISATION PROJECT: MEMORIALISATION FOR NON-RECURRENCE OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

Radhika Hettiarachchi[1]

August 2018

INTRODUCTION

This is the 'story' of the Community Memorialisation Project(CMP) [2]. Memorialisation and its close cousin, truth-telling, are processes that are of paramount importance within the course of transitional justice. As a process through which multiple 'truths' can be sought and documented while providing an opportunity for symbolic reparations, memorialisation can enhance empathy between communities and individuals; which in turn, could contribute to non-recurrence of future violence. Especially after a protracted conflict, such as in Sri Lanka, the long-term efforts to transition from chaos to stability, war to peace, injustice to justice, and destruction to development are rooted in understanding and dealing with a country's fractured past.

> *"Memorialization is a process that satisfies the desire to honour those who suffered or died during conflict and as a means to examine the past and address contemporary issues. It can either promote social recovery after violent conflict ends or crystallize a sense of victimization, injustice, discrimination, and the desire for revenge. Memorialization occurs throughout the conflict life cycle: before conflict begins, during conflict, and after conflict ends. Memorialization initiatives take different forms depending on who initiates them, the stage of the conflict at which they are initiated, and the kind of society that emerges after the violence ends. Thus, memorialization is a highly politicized process that reflects the will of those in power".*
>
> *- Barsalou and Baxter,1*

In the aftermath of a war or period of violence, memory can often be mediated through institutions and media apparatus that are subject to manipulation by those with vested interests. The past can be mobilised in the service of political agendas and ideologies, and the victors can glorify war as a legitimising myth (Liu and Laszlo, 15 and 8). In the case of Sri Lanka, the State's fluid and dynamic shift between protector and perpetrator during the 26-year war and during the many insurrections and uprisings in Sri Lanka's history, makes its role as the arbiter of the master narrative of history, problematic. In addition, the politics of participation determine who may claim a space at the 'peace table' in a post-war context and how they may negotiate security, identity and tangible benefits. 'Outsider narratives' of those that may not fit within a nation-building process deemed suitable by the State, especially of those that are vanquished, are often left out. Similarly, the peoples' perceptions of para-military or armed groups such as the LTTE and the JVP may shift between freedom fighter, rebel or terrorist, depending on where one is situated within those narrative arcs. Identity, nationhood, personal experience and suffering may affect perceptions of history, creating multiple narratives, in the process. This then makes how one relates to history a 'feeling': History becomes more than a linear series of events but the interpretation, an expression and the conflation of many truths. Due to the competing interests and competing narratives of victims that are desperate to tell their versions of the story 'truth' may not matter as much as freeing one's own voice from that of another (de Mel, The Promise of the LLRC, 8). In reality, the very act of telling one's own history is a democratisation of 'truth' and a legitimising claim on one's own life-history and agency. There are symbolic and deliberate silences that extreme trauma leaves out of 'witness accounts' that a more personal narration can bring to the table. In countries in transition from violence to stability and peace, unedited multiple narratives are therefore important to prioritise in memorialisation.

The Community Memorialisation Project was conceptualised in a fluid ethno-political environment. The country was, and still is, in the midst of a prolonged reconciliation process,

---

2   This introduction is an excerpt from a detailed, forthcoming paper about the Community Memorialisation Project. The full paper will be about how the project came to be, from where it drew its resources, what it did, and its perceivable impacts, lessons learned, limitations and recommendations for future work in the area of memorialisation in Sri Lanka.

with the end of the civil war in 2009, but also other incidents of a violent past stemming back further into the 1970s. The hope is to knit together the divided communities and ethnic groups to enable democratic processes and stability to take hold, but this is a complex exercise which demands inclusion of a host of powerbrokers and groups with interests; it includes the creation of a national and shared vision for the future, political and economic reform and significant attitudinal changes in dealing with the past (Kelly and Hamber, 10).

As a nation, Sri Lanka also has a culture of silence and silencing; even the southern insurgencies of the '70s and later in the '80s have nearly faded from public memory. Most efforts by successive Governments to 'remember' have been limited to state-sponsored victory memorials focusing on the heroism of the military with scant regard for the civilian narrative. CMP is based on the premise that a lack of a cohesive strategy of bringing oral history and public memorisation to the forefront, not only marginalises the many truths and histories of those that lived through various violent conflicts in the past 50 years, but also reinforces a single, official narrative. The inclusion of multiple narratives of the victims and survivors can play a pivotal role in remembering and dealing with the past, and building empathy and compassion towards each other. While transcending the traumas and pain may take time, it is possible to acknowledge the past as a first step towards dealing with it effectively (Kelly and Hamber, 13).

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT

The Community Memorialisation Project was conceived as a civil-society led, people's memorialisation project, which sought to bridge the gap between official State-sponsored post-war processes and the need for ground-level initiatives to facilitate multiple truths and multiple voices for dealing with Sri Lanka's past. The project's overarching ethos at first was to combat the loss of narrative, especially non-mainstream narratives, in order to engage people to challenge single narratives by exploring each other's experiences. The objective then was to enable a public discourse that accepted the existence of multiple narratives and experiences that may impact peace, justice and non-recurrence of violent conflict. Building on the experience of the Herstories project,[3] the CMP aimed to collect, archive and create platforms for people-to-people engagement through story-telling. Through such engagement, the project prioritised public acknowledgement of multiple 'subjective truths' and preservation of memory as a key objective[4].

Some of the key questions that drove the development of the project were:

❍ How can a memory project move from an archival product to a process that uses documented narratives to contribute to justice and peace?

❍ How can story-telling and sharing of life histories create a sense of catharsis, empathy and compassion? And can such emotion be used towards peacebuilding and reconciliation?

❍ How can memory be used to understand the root causes of conflict in Sri Lanka?

❍ Can story-telling be used to facilitate an acceptance that there are many 'truths' and that the absolute truth may not matter as much as the ability and the space to tell one's story, and to be acknowledged?

---

3   The Herstories Project is a an archival project, initiated by Radhika Hettiarachchi and implemented together with Viluthu Centre for Human Resource Development. It documented, exhibited and attempted to battle the loss of female narratives in the Sri Lankan conflict - http://herstoryarchive.org/

4   Memory here refers to the people's histories and remembrance, rather than an academic subject area of 'memory studies'.

❍ How can we build on the spontaneous acts of memorialisation and rituals of memory that exist at the grassroots level, in order to complement rather than restrict them?

❍ How can we make it not simply about passing on memory and experience to the next generation, but also about creating a discourse of what this means for Sri Lankans emerging from a culture of violence and conflict?

After 2015 when a formal transitional justice mechanism was initiated by the Government, the project ethos changed from that of a project primarily focused on the preservation of historical memory, to one that promotes people-to-people engagement for dealing with one's own and other's memories. As the project developed, we fully embraced the notion that cross-cultural experiences, inter-generational transfer of memories and the present context of each story-teller, resonated with the other. We hoped that this would create opportunities for not only 'dealing with the past' as the past, but to evaluate the past, present and future through a new lens of non-recurrence of violent conflict. The multi-directionality of memory then is not simply about various 'truths' that compete with each other, but as Michael Rothberg explores in the seminal work on memory *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization,* it is about finding those connections that allow for those multiple memories to co-exist and reach beyond the past. In the case of the CMP, this meant 'using' memory to fully explore how it might impact, support and sustain a longer-term peacebuilding process. There was no definitive proof that the storytelling and experience sharing could lead to meaningful dialogue for non-recurrence of violence in Sri Lanka and as such, the theory of change devised at the very beginning was rife with assumptions.

Some of the initial assumptions were:

❍ That ordinary people contribute to conflict by being ignorant of each other's experiences and of the root causes of conflict, which in turn makes them vulnerable to manipulation by those with vested interests

❍ That a few people with skills and interest in mitigating or transcending conflict can counteract aggressive elements at a grassroots level

❍ That ordinary people need to engage across ethnic and other divisions in order to first understand how to bridge gaps, in their own community groups before working towards non-recurrence of violence at a larger scale

❍ That awakening memories of personal experiences can not only create catharsis, but empathy towards others who have experienced violence at varying degrees

❍ That shared 'Sri Lankan' values maybe an entry point to developing resilience and agency at individual and village level. Having common values, knowing the other's experiences, and understanding root causes of conflict, and a recognition of the other's needs would appeal to the peoples' yearning to 'never experience another war'; especially when faced with emerging conflicts and unrest

❍ That creating awareness of experiences of violence and shared values across ethno-social groups could create connections and opportunities for future peace, especially amongst the next generation that might not have directly experienced violence in their lives

❍ That understanding conflict, may provide skills to recognise early warning signs and strengthen community resistance

The following was an early articulation of the objectives and activities of the project:

Specific Objective	Activity Stream	Activities
To create platforms for individuals and communities, from across ethnic, political and regional divides, to share their stories and engage in community dialogue and memorialising	Grassroots Action on Remembering and Telling Stories	1.1 Media Campaign to elicit public response on memories. 1.2. Community Based Dialogue about memory and story sharing. 1.3 District Based Dialogues to engage the community in in-depth memory work through creative methods. 1.4 Inter District Dialogues to bring people together across dividing lines around shared experiences. 1.5 Building Community Memorials by the communities, with support from artists.
To preserve historical memory through archiving and disseminating the narratives to a wider audience.	Documenting and Disseminating Memories	2.1 Developing an Online Archive for the Memory Project by translating, digitalizing, cataloguing, and collating. 2.2 Documentation of Dialogues and Memorials to be shared with policy makers and other stakeholders. 2.3 Sharing the Stories with public and school libraries accessible to community members and students, civil society organizations (CSOs), policy makers, and diaspora.
To facilitate a process of common understanding on policy outlooks and programs on managing, including, and using historical memories.	Facilitating Common Understanding	3.1 Series of Meetings with Regional and National Stakeholders to discuss the importance of grassroots memorialising for peace-building. 3.2 Writing a White Paper with recommendations on doing memory work 3.3 Final workshop, which will focus on advocating for policy on memory work

Source: project proposal, 2015

As the project progressed, its approaches, content and expectations shifted and changed shape. As per the Development Evaluation Methodology[5], the project was developed with flexibility and reflexivity built-in. Through constant feedback from the stakeholders (participants, NGO and community leaders at the grassroots level, project partners, people's consultations), the project team reviewed, revised and shifted the goal-posts of the project to suit the needs of memorialisation in context. It is important to also recognise, that as the project grew, the socio-political context within which it functioned remained complex and dynamic. Since initiation, the State's transitional justice process was evolving slowly, with structures and systems being prioritised over deliberate action on memorialisation. This was in stark contrast to the pervasive, visible, triumphalist memorialisation efforts (such as the 'Victory Day' or memorials only emphasising the military victory) which were common in the immediate aftermath of the war.

---

5   Refer to the Discussion Paper 2 on people's views of memorials and memorialisation in Sri Lanka.

By the end of 2017, after much post-activity review, feedback from the participants and partners, and internal deliberations[6], the following theory of change emerged as the core elements of the project:
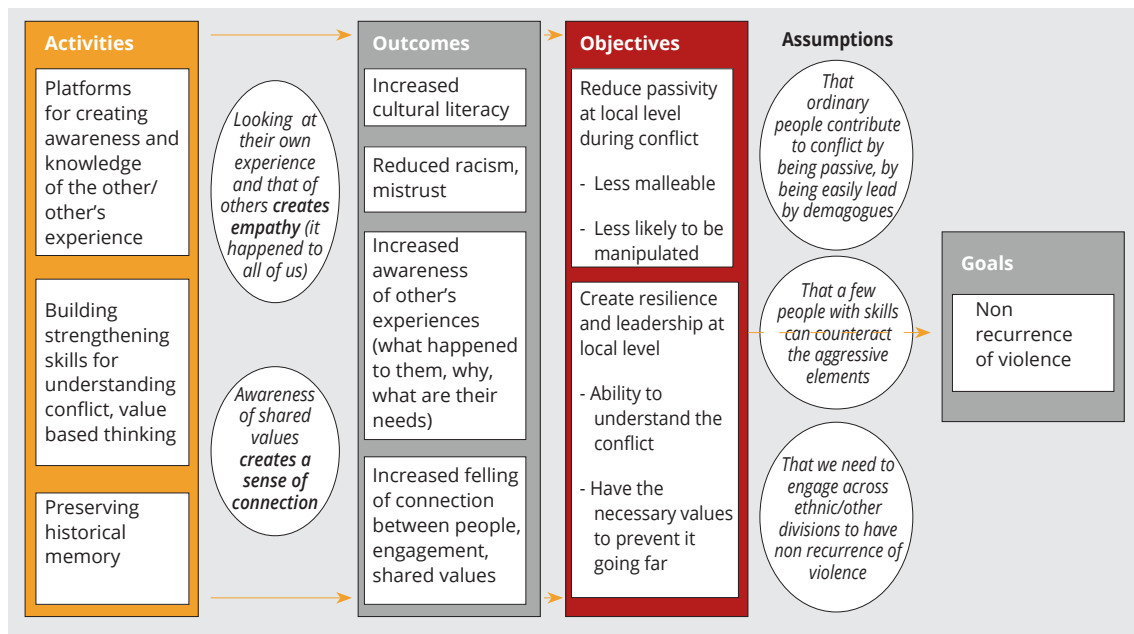
As seen above, the outcome expected is to contribute to non-recurrence of violence through the reduction of passivity, increasingly individual and community agency, providing awareness and skills in order to make community groups less malleable to manipulations by forces with vested interest in conflicts, re-establishing links across boundaries and a return to 'core values', with the individuals and community groups with whom the project works.

The following areas grew more concrete within the above theory of change:

○ **Collecting and archiving people's histories[7]:** 354 personal histories were collected from Ampara, Mannar and Matara districts. These were collected through a completely voluntary process, where those willing to share their stories were offered a platform to do so, in their own words and in their own space, using oral history protocols for responsible collection and archiving. As a public history archive, these personal histories of individuals are freely available, without omission, to the public at the National Archives of Sri Lanka. They are preserved unedited (original materials such as letters, memory maps and other non-verbal forms of expression) and in full (video and audio footage of all interviews etc.), so as to avoid framing them within a meta-narrative. A digital collection, which is a combination of unedited and unframed written histories as well as videos, photo-essays and audio narratives edited for the web (from full interviews publicly available at the National Archives), is archived online at www.memorymap.lk

---

6   These include: 671 individuals from Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil communities shared their views on story-telling and sharing through pocket meetings at village level; 736 village-level feedback forms from Matara, Mannar and Ampara showcased results on how people felt when they heard or shared their stories; 300 people surveyed in the same three districts, using a sample of participants and a comparison group of their neighbours; 28 in-depth interviews from January 2017 and January 2018 that provided a set of baseline and ex post interviews for impact assessment, and 5 regional consultation meetings in Jaffna, Anuradhapura, Matara, Batticaloa, and Kandy that provided 231 people's viewpoints on memorials.

7   Refer to the Narrative History Documentation: A Tool-kit for more information on the methodologies, ethical concerns and responsible story-telling measures employed in the CMP

Details of people's histories collected by the Community Memorialisation Project
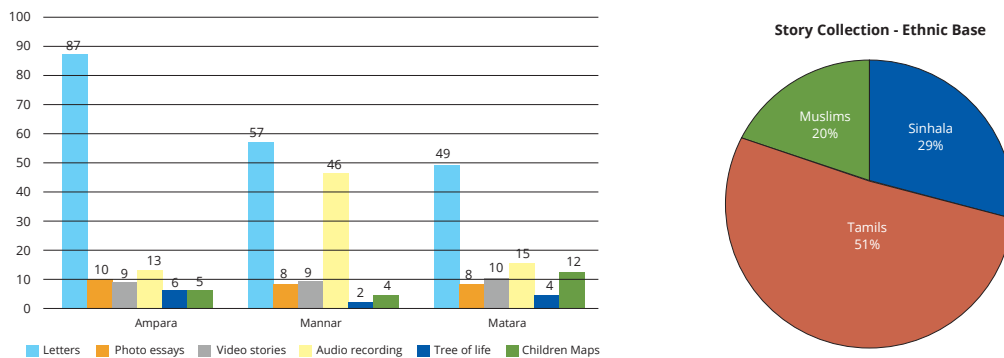
○ **Disseminating people's histories and encouraging people-to-people engagement[8]:** This is a three-step process of dialogues at community levels to strengthen local agency in resisting violent conflict, which is supported by a curated travelling exhibition of 60 stories. A dispersed archive of 50 stories in book format, is also given to all district libraries. In all cases, information is shared about how to access the full archive online or at the National Archives

○ **Creating a public discourse on non-recurrence of violence through mass media[9]:** By sharing stories from the archive as a means to initiate public awareness and a discourse on understanding conflict causes and preventing violence in the future in Sinhala, Tamil and English. This component uses radio and TV talk shows (that reached over 260,000 on radio and 330,000 people on TV per show on average), print media features (with 52 articles published), social media articles (with a reach of 98,344 on average and an active discussion when posted on Facebook), and focus group discussions with media content-influencers (5 round table discussions with a total of 83 key actors)

○ **Engaging practitioners and policy-makers:** By presenting lessons learned at local and international conferences, sharing impacts at working group sessions with practitioners, and providing technical advice to key Government actors interested in memorialisation

The CMP is jointly implemented by The Herstories Project curator, Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka, Viluthu Centre for Human Resource Development, Prathiba Media Network and the Akkraipattu Women's Development Foundation.

Phase II of the project (2018 -2020) based on the lessons learned from the pilot phase, will be launched in three new districts - Anuradhapura, Kalutara and Moneragala. In addition, the project activities will be consolidated in the current project districts by extending its reach to three new divisions in each district. While no more story collection and archiving will done, the new phase will develop a specific project component focused on youth.

---

8   Refer to the Introduction and the facilitation guides for the three levels of dialogue used in CMP
9   Refer to Narrative History Documentation: A Tool-kit which looks at some of the methodologies of using public history, ethics and learning from using media for creating a public discourse on memorialisation and peace

THE CONTENTS OF THIS RESOURCE PACK

This resource pack is a collection of the research, discussion papers, tools and facilitation guides for dialogue developed for the Community Memorialisation Project (based initially on methodologies and lessons learned from the Herstories Project).
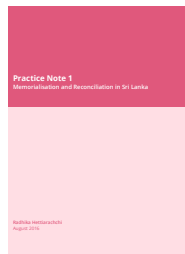
Practice Note 1: Memorialisation and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

This is a practitioner's perspective and lessons learned from the implementation of the Herstories Project. It served as a preliminary document at the initial states of the Community Memorialisation project and its development.
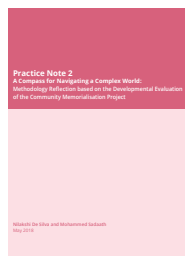
Practice Note 2: A Compass for Navigating a Complex World: Methodology Reflection based on the Developmental Evaluation of the Community Memorialisation Project

This is a practitioners perspective and lessons learned from developing and implementing the Developmental Evaluation Methodology. It showcases a methodology that contributes to the cycle of reflexivity, learning and evolution built-in to the Community Memorialisation Project.

Discussion Paper 1: Challenges and Opportunities for Memorialisation in Sri Lanka. Grassroots Reflections from the Community Memorialisation Project

This is a discussion paper meant for practitioners and policy makers about local and global practices of memorialisation, in the context of the lessons, grassroots viewpoints and recommendations emerging from implementation the Community Memorialisation Project.
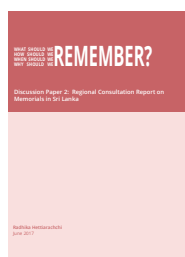
Discussion Paper 2: What, How, When, Why Should We Remember? Regional Consultation Report on Memorials in Sri Lanka

This is a cumulative report and analysis of people's viewpoints on memorialisation and memorials in Sri Lanka, that is meant for practitioners and policy makers of memorialisation initiatives. It comprises the viewpoints of grassroots actors, academics, civil society, local Government officials and youth from five regional consultations held in the North, East, North Central, South and Central Provinces.
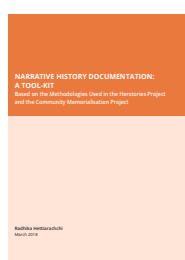
Narrative History Documentation: A Tool-kit based on the Methodologies used in the Herstories Project and the Community Memorialisation Project

This is an exploration of the ethical concerns of narrative history documentation as public history, lessons learned in implementing the projects with regard to collection, archiving and dissemination of peoples' histories, and a description of the tools used in oral history archiving.

Going Beyond the Archive: Facilitated Dialogue Using Public History Collections

This is an introduction, rationale, objectives and lessons learned from the three-step dialogue process that uses memorialisation and people's histories to strengthen community resilience and capacity of peacebuilding. It is accompanied by the three facilitation guides developed for the dialogues held at village, inter-divisional and district levels.
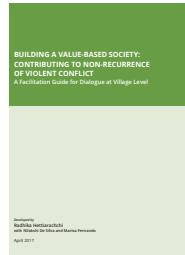
a. **Building a Value-Based Society: Contributing to Non-recurrence of Violent Conflict : Facilitation Guide for Dialogue at Village Level**

b. **Understanding and Rising Above Conflict: Facilitation Guide for Dialogues at Inter-Divisional Level**
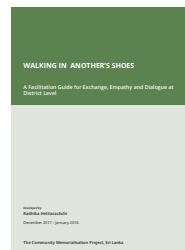
c. **Walking in Another's Shoes: A Facilitation Guide for Exchange, Empathy and Dialogue at District Level**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barsalou, J. and Baxter, V., 'The urge to remember: the role of memorials in social reconstruction and transitional justice'. *In Stabilization and Reconstruction Series No.5*., January 2007.

De Mel, N. The Promise of the LLRC: Women's testimony and justice in post- war Sri Lanka. In *ICES Research paper series 04.* Colombo, 2013.

Kelly, G and Hamber, B. 'Coherent, contested or confused? Views on reconciliation in Northern Ireland'. Paper presented at *Reconciliation: Rhetoric or Relevance? A roundtable discussion on concepts and practices of reconciliation,* Belfast: 9 June 2004

Liu, J.H. and Laszlo J., 'A narrative theory of history and identity: Social identity, Social representations, society and the individual'. In *G. Moloney and I. Walker (Eds.) Social representations and identity: content, process and power,* p. 85-107. London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2007.

Rothberg, *M. Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* Stanford University Press, 2009.