

Social solidarity as a dimension of transitional justice: the case of ‘*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*’ in post-conflict Colombia

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Abstract

The field of transitional justice lacks a comprehensive understanding to the role that social solidarity plays in transitional justice contexts. There is a lack of knowledge of the means through which victims can exercise their social agency to explore mechanisms of reparation beyond truth commissions, tribunals, and trials. This article argues that social solidarity is a crucial dimension and a novel perspective from which to develop transitional justice processes from a victims’ point of view in post-conflict societies. Employing a participative action research method, this article’s importance rests in the idea that Colombian victims’ groups from Eastern Antioquia view social solidarity as a crucial dimension of transitional justice in developing the project ‘*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*’. It establishes that this effort is a powerful novel mechanism to claim justice, reparation, recognition, and guarantees of non-recurrence from an unofficial angle. It demonstrates that comprehending social solidarity as a vital dimension of transitional justice stresses the importance of victims’ social agency to conduct collaborative collective actions in order to support inclusive processes of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) beyond official agendas and narratives.

Key words

Social Solidarity, Transitional Justice, Post-Conflict, Victims, Colombia

Introduction

The armed conflict in Colombia was one of the longest lasting the world has seen (almost six decades), with an estimated 18% of the population direct victims of the war¹. According to the National Centre for Historical Memory of Colombia – NCHM – and the International Centre for Transitional Justice – ICTJ –, decades of conflict in Colombia resulted in more than eight and a half million victims, including around seven and a half million internally displaced people (the second highest globally, after Syria), with civil society being principally affected. The numbers are immense: the Colombian armed conflict claimed the lives of at least 352,786 civilians, there were at least 82,998 enforced disappearances, up to 40,000 kidnappings, more than 17,000 child soldiers, nearly, 9,000 landmine incidents, around 5,000 extrajudicial killings, and 15,222 acts of sexual violence². The NCHM has established that there were more than 1,982 massacres of civilians between 1980 and 2012.

On November 24th, 2016, the Colombian government and The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – FARC – signed a peace agreement, ending more than 50 years of armed conflict. After a divisive referendum process (50.2% of the electorate initially rejecting the peace agreement), and then further weeks of renegotiation, the Colombian Congress ratified a revised peace agreement on November 30th, 2016. This date officially marked the end of the Colombian armed conflict, initiating a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of FARC ex-combatants back into Colombian society. In addition, the peace agreement established the creation of three mechanisms to

deliver a transitional justice process for the country: the *Special Peace Jurisdiction* (JEP), the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (CEV), and the *Search Unit for Disappeared People* (UBPD).

For this particular context, transitional justice discourses are underpinned by an assumption that truth commissions, tribunals, and trials will assist societies to ‘come to terms’ with, and move on from, complex legacies of violence. However, victims’ initiatives based on unconventional social approaches can disrupt these assumptions. Local communities are endeavouring to turn the page of violence and conflict in ways that may contrast distinctly with the official approaches of the state, or the priorities of sponsored transitional justice institutions. Consequently, specific local practices of transitional justice developed by victims’ communities indicate that survivors of armed conflicts are resisting, challenging, and transforming official narratives of reconciliation, social justice, and reintegration. Those practices suggest that the pursuit of justice in transitional justice contexts is more dynamic and contested than the positive narrative of post-conflict implies³.

Conventional perspectives have established that transitional justice processes have to remain focused on civil society groups, private institutions, international cooperation bodies, and the state in order to guarantee a positive and transformative socio-political impact⁴. However, recent examples including the Balkans, South Africa, the Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone have proven differently⁵. These cases reveal that transitional justice is driven by a plethora of diverse civil actors, often using unconventional modes of organisation and repertoires of action linked to social movement modalities and other forms of collective action and victims’ mobilisation⁶. Thus it can be established that victims have been viewed incorrectly as ‘objects’ of transitional justice rather than ‘subjects’ with their own agency, projects, priorities, and organisational ability⁷.

In regards to these discussions, this research argues that victims’ transitional justice initiatives based on social solidarity are powerful novel mechanisms to claim justice, reparation, recognition, and guarantees of non-recurrence from unofficial approaches. It also claims that understanding social solidarity as a crucial dimension of transitional justice highlights the importance of victims’ social agency to conduct collaborative collective actions to support inclusive processes of DDR beyond official agendas and narratives. The field of transitional justice lacks a comprehensive overlook of the role that social solidarity plays in transitional justice. Moreover, there is an absence in comprehending through what means victims can exercise their social agency to explore mechanisms of reparation beyond truth commissions, tribunals, and trials. How are social solidarity victim initiatives contributing to delivering transitional justice via unofficial approaches? What ways are victim collaborative collective actions stressing the importance of contesting official narratives in transitional justice scenarios? Is social solidarity critical for developing holistic transitional justice processes from a victims’ perspective in post-conflict societies?

To address these questions, a multi-strategy qualitative research approach⁸ was taken using participatory action research techniques to reconstruct the socio-historical evolution of victims’ organisations from Eastern Antioquia, Colombia, from 1998 to 2019. Over the course of twelve years, groups of victims of the Colombian armed conflict participated in research to understand and document their struggles for recognition, visibility and inclusion. Data was collected between 2013 and 2019 and consisted of sixty-three semi-structured interviews with people from different victims’ organizations from Eastern Antioquia. A particular focus of the interviews was on female victims from the *Association of Victims of Granada Town* (ASOVIDA), the *Provincial Association of Victims to Citizens* (APROVIACI), the *Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia* (AMOR) and the *Centre to Approach Reconciliation and Reparation* (CARE).

This article will highlight a victims’ project based on social solidarity, ‘*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*’, an initiative for identifying burial sites and mass graves where missing people of the Colombian armed conflict could be buried, and recognising the ways victims have been protagonists over the decades of internal armed conflict in Colombia. An analysis follows of how this collaborative project is a tool to demand truth, justice, and recognition in the on-going process of transitional justice in Colombia.

During six years of data collection, twenty-three towns across Eastern Antioquia were visited. The final sample of interviews comprised thirty-nine women (61% of the sample) and twenty-four men (39% of the sample). An average of three/four interviews was conducted per town, and the length of the interviews was between forty minutes to two hours. In order to categorise the information, a conceptual clustering analysis⁹ was developed. This method was used to classify interviews as clusters of information, following a conceptual description to group narratives together by similarity into classes and to generate a classification structure. This approach, related to fuzzy set theory¹⁰, allowed the creation of three diverse clusters of information to manipulate the qualitative data combining a dialectical inductive/deductive reasoning process¹¹ and a hypothesis generating method¹².

This methodological design consents improving the data analysis process through combining the use of clusters of information (characterising topics and narratives in terms of logical rules) with the inductive/deductive technique in order to derive knowledge and verify hypotheses. It also permit integrate deductive tools and data mining resources with qualitative analysis software, generating a dialogic conversation between theoretical ideas and the qualitative data derived from the case study. For the purposes of this article, the results focused on understanding and comprehending the principal motivations behind the victims' initiative of the '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*' from a social solidarity and transitional justice perspective.

The article contains four sections. The first presents theoretical antecedents of the concept of social solidarity and examines the relationship between social solidarity and transitional justice. The second part addresses the characteristics of the former Colombian armed conflict, focusing on the region of Eastern Antioquia and its victims' organisations efforts. The third part analyses the initiative '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*', a victims' collaborative project to identify burial sites and mass graves where missing people of the Colombian armed conflict might be buried. It will be argued that this effort based on social solidarity is an innovative tool to demand truth, justice, and recognition in the on-going process of transitional justice in Colombia. The final part concludes with some views on understanding social solidarity as a crucial dimension of transitional justice; and how victims' collective actions based on social solidarity are powerful mechanisms to claim social justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence in post-conflict Colombia.

Revisiting the concept of social solidarity

Historically, conceptual formulations of the theory of solidarity presented by Emile Durkheim in his book *The Division of Labour in Society*¹³, particularly his concept of organic solidarity, have provided the theoretical foundations for the concept of social solidarity. This pioneering work focused on analysing the sources of moral order and the construction of social order in society. The intention was to explore the interrelation between society and the individual. It contrasts the solidarity of resemblance, characteristic of segmented societies where 'mechanical solidarity' succeeded, and the solidarity of occupational interdependence in morally dense societies, formed by 'organic solidarity'¹⁴. For Durkheim, in archaic societies, which are homogeneous and undifferentiated, there exists 'mechanical solidarity', a type of solidarity where individual consciousness is dissolved into the collective. On the other hand, in organised societies, solidarity is based on the autonomy of individuals, division of functions, functional interdependence, and mutual exchange; in other words, solidarity is 'organic', and defined by social differences. Thus, Durkheim's general theory of solidarity argues that all societies necessarily imply some form and degree of social group solidarity: cohesion between individuals as well as between individuals and society group. As a result, from this perspective, organic solidarity can be act as a catalyser of social solidarity in society and is a distinctive feature of morality and modernity¹⁵.

After this initial approach, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*¹⁶ Durkheim underpinned the concept of social solidarity as the very object of collective worship, stressing that social solidarity actions are based on willingness to help other people without immediately getting something in return. He argued that social solidarity is about shared commitments to social practices and moral duty. Furthermore, Durkheim emphasised that social solidarity and morality are indivisible, underlining

solidarity as a crucial mode of moral relation among others in human social life: ‘morality consists in social solidarity with the group, and varies according to that solidarity. Cause all social life to vanish, and moral life would vanish at the same time, having no object to cling to’¹⁷. However, this connection between solidarity and morality was not new. It can be traced back to David Hume’s¹⁸ philosophical arguments that passion and reason are both necessary elements of any moral consideration which in turn may guide individual action. Nevertheless, this novel Durkheimian approach highlights the importance of assumed social solidarity as an emotional impulse to help one’s fellow men, centred on mutual understanding, sympathy, and empathy¹⁹.

Four decades later, Parsons and Shils²⁰ and Parsons²¹ addressed the concept of social solidarity by revisiting Durkheim’s ideas and using the framework of structural functionalism. For those scholars, any action system aimed at its own survival should achieve four functional preconditions: pattern-maintenance, integration, goal-attainment, and adaptation²². Inside the action system the function of integration is performed by social solidarity. It represents the combination of social positions and is predetermined by the structural social norms that determine which actions should be preferred or expected²³. This perspective assumes society as a complex social system whose elements work together to achieve solidarity and stability. Also, for these authors, society is guided by intricate social structures and structured social patterns that can shape individual social behaviour where social solidarity is an expected outcome. In other words, structural functionalism comprehended social solidarity as an action where the individual can reach personal goals and, at the same time, benefit society as a whole. This assumption is based on the idea that the performance of an individual inside a structural social system has motivational significance to himself, and social solidarity reinforces the norms and values of this particular social structure²⁴.

In the 1980s, the concept of social solidarity started to be related to the notion of recognition, highlighting the idea that social solidarity can be important for social recognition and justice in modern societies. From this perspective, Axel Honneth²⁵ argued that social solidarity is a precondition for social recognition, human prosperity, self-realization, and the possibility of leading a good life. For this scholar, the concept of social solidarity must deal with the good life for all and it is about coordinating social and cultural life chances in a morally and socially just way²⁶. Thus, Honneth stated, decades later, acts of social solidarity can empower counter publics or disadvantaged communities if those solidaristic actions are based on a distribution of possibilities for recognition and there are preconditions for social cohesion inside local communities²⁷. This perspective stresses the relevance of social solidarity in helping the recovery of social cohesion inside broken communities and for the continuity of communal affective ties after social disruption. More importantly, this approach emphasises social solidarity as a moral attitude characterised by social identification with ‘the other’, underpinning the value of social solidarity as a genuinely productive, equal, and transformative empowerment social force²⁸.

In recent decades, the concept of social solidarity has been envisioned as the main condition to establish the values of inclusion, redistribution, and social justice in liberal societies, and as a vital moral principle inside contested social contexts²⁹. This outlook defines actions of social solidarity as a matter of public responsibility and determines social conventions and restrictions. It also promotes group differentiation and unity in diversity, taking into account social inclusion as a criterion of collective progress³⁰. It assumes social solidarity as an intersubjective process originating in a particular experience of an individual recognising their needs in a subjective encounter with another group member. As a result, this intersubjective agonistic social process has social redistribution and degrees of social recognition as main outcomes, strengthening the cohesion of the social group³¹.

Furthermore, the idea of social solidarity as a process forged through political struggle, which seeks to challenge different forms of social oppression and injustice, has been revisited in recent years³². This approach highlights the importance of social solidarity as a set of human relations that involve the transformation of existing political identities and power relations in society. According to Juul³³, there is an urgent need for the development and implementation of novel forms of social solidarity in order to create socio-political cohesion in contested societies or in communities affected by armed conflicts or war³⁴. This scholar emphasises the role of social solidarity and social justice as preconditions for

human self-realization and inclusion. As a consequence, it can be assumed that social solidarity should be treated as a general prerequisite for the reestablishment of individual and collective social trust in fragile or divided communities.

To sum up this initial section, the concept of social solidarity has come to be understood as a transformative and contested social process, which works through the negotiation and renegotiation of different forms of social recognition, redistribution, empathy towards others, moral frameworks for social action and as a socio-political group identification³⁵. It is crucial to stress also the transformative potential of social solidarity actions as catalysers for changing social practices and moral orders. Thus, social solidarity actions can contest existing arrangements of social injustice, transforming material social relations, and becoming fundamental for achieving social inclusion and recognition. In other words, the establishment of a long-term set of social solidarity actions is key for generating processes of social change, understanding social solidarity as a positive bond between individuals that can produce collaborative solidaristic behaviour. This continuing foundation generate also novel social practices, shaping new positive relations and connections between different actors of society. In short, actions of social solidarity are central for the exercise of individual identities, social agency, and moral attitudes in order to increase the level of social cohesion inside communities³⁶.

Social solidarity and transitional justice

The relationship between social solidarity and transitional justice can be understood as a component of the research field of human rights, focusing particularly on the area of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) studies and as a particular contested relationship of political, cultural and social collective action making in the aftermath of armed conflicts or authoritarianism. It places actions of social solidarity and production of collaborative knowledge by victims and other civil society actors in a broader socio-historical context, steaming sociological and human rights perspectives that constitutes the discipline of peace-building and transitional justice studies.

Contemporary developments on this relationship can be constructed around five central aspects. First, mapping frameworks for how contemporary actions of victims' social solidarity can and should be known and acted upon in transitional justice scenarios, and what justice, reparation, and reconciliation are and what must be done with it in the wake of atrocities and suffering³⁷. Second, exploring how the four traditional elements of transitional justice (truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence) are interrelated with the construction of degrees of social solidarity from the victims' point of view after the war³⁸. Third, placing social solidarity actions as a mechanism to build strong civil society groups to claim human rights in transitional justice contexts. Understand the link between social solidarity and transitional justice as a crucial relationship in order to develop inclusive societies, with real possibilities to develop justice, inclusion, redistribution, and recognition, after the war³⁹. Fourth, questioning by what means victims' social solidarity actions can be understood as an exercise of social agency by survivors of armed conflicts, helping to explore novel social mechanisms of reparation beyond truth commissions, tribunals, and trials⁴⁰. Finally, examining if actions of victims' social solidarity can dispute traditional approaches to the legalism of the justice of transitional justice, which is defined, in conventional terms, of a relationship with the state, individual accountability, and delivered through official institutional mechanisms and approaches⁴¹. It will help to investigate also how projects of victims' social solidarity engage with survivors' needs, human rights frameworks, local communities, victims' agency, and social mobilisation aspects; and by what means social solidarity contests endurances of injustice and discrimination, pursuing social justice in particular political contexts and with regards to the responsibility of the state.

However, it is important to revisit the fact that the field of transitional justice lacks a comprehensive approach to the role that social solidarity plays in transitional justice scenarios. Mostly, this failure is because transitional justice is in general under-theorised, but it is also informed by the way in which transitional justice is identified. The traditional definition of transitional justice has four pillars: criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations, and institutional reform⁴². As different scholars have suggested, this conventional focus on institutions, from top-to-bottom state interventions and the law,

has driven a trend to associate victims and civil society groups with non-governmental organisations, and, in particular, human rights bodies. As a consequence, there is a tendency to concentrate on the role of established, organised, and bureaucratized civil society groups in order to support transitional justice mechanisms; this reinforces the idea of victims as objects of transitional justice rather than subjects⁴³. In other words, this orthodox approach stresses the incorrect idea that social solidarity actions and political dynamics of victims and civil society groups have to be organised and officialised in order to be effective and accurate in transitional justice times.

In this context, I argue that taking the role of social solidarity to be a central dimension of transitional justice is crucial for comprehending how actions, strategies, and programmes made by non-organised/non-bureaucratized civil actors and victims attempt to achieve the objectives that the mainstream transitional justice framework proposes, but from unofficial perspectives. The actions of official non-governmental organisations tend to be assumed as specific, focus-centred, and sector-based, using official mechanisms and narratives as the principal point of reference, with civil society groups fundamentally impersonating or performing as an intermediary between official transitional justice mechanisms and the victims. I claim that the role that social solidarity plays in transitional justice scenarios goes beyond narrow institutional focus and normative prescriptions, challenging conventional conceptualisation of the full range of roles civil society and victims can play in shaping transitional justice. It is, in other words, to recognise transitional justice as a dynamic, diverse and contextual process where actions of social solidarity are providing means of expression for victims and survivors that are not open to them through the formal discourse of citizenship⁴⁴. Furthermore, there is an absence in understanding through what means victims can exercise their social agency to explore novel and unofficial transitional justice mechanisms of reparation and recognition. One of the main aims is to examine how victims must define, promote, and inform public debate about reconciliation, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.

To sum up this section, I argue that social solidarity is a novel perspective and a crucial dimension to develop transitional justice processes in post-conflict societies from a victims' perspective. The principal challenge is how to promote victims' initiatives of social solidarity that might help local communities to comprehend contested socio-political ideas, contest official versions about the past, and support inclusive processes of transitional justice. This would improve understandings of how the development of victims' social solidarity actions can be a powerful mechanism for claiming truth, justice, and reparation in contested societies. Comprehending social solidarity as a crucial dimension of transitional justice stresses the importance of recognising victims' social agency in conducting collaborative collective actions to support inclusive processes of DDR beyond official agendas and narratives; appreciating victims as subjects with their own agency, projects, priorities, and organisational ability.

The next section explores and tests these ideas by analysing the collaborative project '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*', an example of social solidarity developed by the victims of the Colombian armed conflict that is taking place in Eastern Antioquia, Colombia.

Eastern Antioquia and its victims' organisations initiatives

Antioquia is the Colombian department with the highest number of victims of the former Colombian armed conflict (1.2 million), and Eastern Antioquia is the region with the highest percentage of massacres in the last twenty years in the country⁴⁵. According to the Regional Programme for Development and Peace of Eastern Antioquia (PRODEPAZ), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the NCHM, from 1993 to 2018 four in ten Colombian civilian victims were women, most likely victims of a massacre and coming from Eastern Antioquia. For these three organisations, there are four principal reasons why the armed conflict was so intense in this region and why women were the principal victims.

Firstly, nearly 70% of Colombian energy resources are concentrated in this territory, it was a geographically strategic corridor within the armed conflict, and women play an active role in local

energy companies. Secondly, in the logic of the Colombian armed conflict, women were *war booty* and a specific target for warriors⁴⁶. While a strongly patriarchal society exists in this region, targeting women was a powerful way to debilitate local communities and damage their family structures⁴⁷. Thirdly, it is characteristic of targeting civilians as a method of war. This strategy was utilised by both illegal and legal armed groups, and became the main objective of military operations⁴⁸. By killing innocent bystanders, they demonstrated power, superiority and ownership of particular territories to rivals, as well as undermining the social base of support for the opposing armed group⁴⁹. A final explanation is that a *regime of terror* was constructed in the region, where guerrilla and paramilitary groups used cruelty to dehumanize their war adversaries⁵⁰.

Furthermore, the former situation in Eastern Antioquia is a good case study for understanding the dynamic of the armed conflict in Colombia as a whole. Eastern Antioquia was the first place where guerrilla groups used landmines to prevent territorial control by the Colombian army. It was also the territory where the methodical implementation of massacres against civilians was used as a war strategy by paramilitary groups to spread fear and terror in the country, and where civilians experienced continuous suffering⁵¹. Thus, the citizens of Eastern Antioquia faced all possible consequences of the war: stigmatization, forced displacements, massacres, persecution, marginalization, extrajudicial executions, and torture. They were the victims of all forms of violation and human rights abuses⁵².

In this context, the government and economy of Eastern Antioquia was characterised in three ways. Firstly, by on-going fighting between different illegal and legal armed groups for control over the territory and its resources. Secondly, by the co-optation of local institutions such town councils or local governments by illegal forces in order to affect local democracy and control economic resources. Finally, by the establishment of illegal economies around drug trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion that strongly affected local and regional economies⁵³.

Against this backdrop, in 2003 two Colombian NGOs (Conciudadania and the Centre for Research and Popular Education) began an initiative in Eastern Antioquia called *Emotional First Aid*. This programme aimed to train victims about how to help each other to overcome the pain caused by the war, through practical workshops that addressed the psychological impact it had on them. One of the outcomes of this project was the creation of the victims' group *The Life and Mental Health Promoters* – PROVISAME – also known as *Las Abrazadas* (The Embraced). In 2006, forty-five members of this support group (most of them victims of internal displacement) decided to go beyond the group's initial aim and founded *The Association of Victims of Granada Town* (ASOVIDA) in Granada Town, Eastern Antioquia, with the purpose of demanding their rights as victims. Having ASOVIDA as a main reference, in 2006 a group of women from San Carlos Town, Eastern Antioquia, adapted the same methodology used by *Las Abrazadas* to deliver psychological help to the victims of this particular town. Another objective was also to confront the pain caused by the war through therapeutic workshops with a gendered perspective.

After initial support from AMOR, Conciudadania, and the Centre for Research and Popular Education, this collective of women founded the victims' group *The Centre to Approach Reconciliation and Reparation* (CARE) with the main purpose being to support victims in all aspects of emotional, mental and psychological recovery. After two years of intensive healing work with the victims, in 2009 CARE started to focus on other related issues, adding three more aims to its original project. Firstly, the creation of community strategies to bring social reparation and public recognition to the victims of San Carlos Town; Secondly, the development of processes of reconciliation and recognition between victims and perpetrators to rebuild social cohesion in the town; and finally, the compilation of victims and perpetrators narratives as a mechanism to establish the truth about what happened during the years of the armed conflict in San Carlos Town. The collaborative project '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*' is a result of the implementation of these three aims and it is based on a social solidarity approach.

The case of '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*'

'Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves' is a victims' initiative based on social solidarity created by CARE, between 2009 and 2010, to produce local knowledge and collect information to find missing people disappeared during the Colombian armed conflict. One of the original aims was to involve the population of Eastern Antioquia in identifying places where people presumed missing could be buried. After years of work and research, CARE established that more than 94 people had gone missing because of the armed conflict in San Carlos Town. In order to produce data to find missing people, CARE initially distributed 200 detailed maps of the municipality (including rural areas) across the town, asking people of the community to give information about probable locations of mass graves. To provide anonymity to informants, CARE suggested bringing the filled maps in closed envelopes to the church or the local council. Another recommendation was to leave the envelopes at the door of the houses of the victims' association leaders. Recalling the motivations behind this initiative, a member of CARE stated:

'We distributed maps all around San Carlos, and I remember that at the beginning people of the town looked at us with fear and mistrust. We said to the people: 'you don't have to give your name, if you have any information just mark a cross on the map and done! Simple as that!' We just wanted to have clues, bits of information, a trace, and bring some hope... we wanted to know where to start our search, we wanted to find the places where our dead relatives are waiting for us'⁵⁴.

After the first distribution of maps, leading members of CARE started the production of collaborative knowledge through the creation of 'banks of maps' to identify local and regional mass graves based on the information brought in by the community. As a result, the project *'Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves'* was established. In 2010, CARE started to develop a collaborative method to systematise victims and perpetrators narratives in order to create cartographies that were more accurate. The aim was also to collect public information from soldiers, ex-combatants, and active fighters (paramilitaries and guerrilla members, and Colombian army personnel), in order to establish the correct places where those groups buried the bodies of missing persons. Moreover, it was a complex and difficult process to track and check pieces of information that these different sources delivered through the maps. Just checking the physical places involved walking for many hours across the region, meeting illegal groups, avoiding landmine fields, digging in the earth for long periods of time and, in the end, finding the bones or clothes of missing relatives or friends. Regarding this difficult process, a member of CARE recalled:

'We found the mass grave in El Jordán, a rural area of San Carlos, after six hours of walking and searching. I was in charge of digging and I remember saying to myself all the time 'please God, give me the energy and braveness to keep doing this; please Holy Spirit, give me the strength and resistance to not faint or throw up'. And suddenly, after two hours of digging and digging, I found the clothes and some bones of my daughter.... I started crying and saying 'Thank God, thank God, thank God'. You know what? I think that you have to have a huge and open heart to do this; seriously... you have to make a lot of sacrifices. My uncle lost a leg in a landmine field trying to find this mass grave; my cousin is accused of helping guerrilla groups just because we crossed a guerrilla camp in the search. But the good thing is that we could give to my daughter a proper funeral and now we can visit her in the proper grave... this grave in the cemetery is a huge relief for us after all these years of uncertainty and pain'⁵⁵.

After nine years of the project, twenty-seven mass graves have been found in the region as a result of the information gathered through those collaborative cartographies. By 2020, CARE has produced knowledge and data to develop more than 73 accurate maps and cartographies where presumably 213 missing people of the region are buried. The National Committee of Reparation and Reconciliation of Colombia⁵⁶ argued that this initiative is making an important contribution to bringing the issue of missing people into the public sphere in Colombia. Thus the elaboration of these collaborative cartographies is helping victims in the process of healing and mourning, and it is a crucial step to know the truth in the midst of the official transitional justice process.

In this context, one of the main outcomes of secretly abducting, detaining or enforced disappearance as an armed conflict strategy is the destruction of social cohesion and solidarity in local communities. The development of collective feelings of distress, mistrust, guilt and a permanent breakdown in trust of neighbours and friends can deeply undermine communal living and mutual respect⁵⁷. In this respect, it could be argued that for the case of San Carlos Town the collaborative construction of mass graves cartographies is helping to restore the sense of social cohesion inside local communities affected by the war. It also demonstrates how actions of sharing information with victims can be understood as an expression of social solidarity for this particular situation. Honneth⁵⁸ and Beer and Koster⁵⁹ argued that if members of a community act out of social solidarity, then it is a proof of some degrees of social cohesion and an example of direct involvement and sympathy to others. In short, empathy to ‘the other’, ‘the stranger’, and ‘the different’ is key to develop processes of social solidarity in contested societies. Addressing how the construction of social solidarity through the elaboration of collaborative cartographies has helped social cohesion in San Carlos Town, a member of CARE expressed:

‘I like to think that when somebody in town gives us a piece of information knowing that it could be really risky for him or her, it is because this person realises that, at the end of the day, we are a united community that is kind and help their fellows. When a member of your family needs help I guess that you go immediately to offer some support, right? Well, in my opinion all these cartographies are expressing the support of our town to the people that can’t have a normal life here because they are trying to find their missing relatives every day, and they need our help right now... You know what? I strongly believe that when people of our town exchange information, mark crosses on the mass graves maps and help us in the construction of these cartographies, it is a way to say to the *guerrillas*, to the Colombian army and to the new paramilitaries groups of the region that people of San Carlos will survive this war and we are united. We will survive because we are a strong big family and these legal and illegal groups are just despicable temporal visitors’⁶⁰.

Regarding the relationship of overcoming mistrust and building degrees of social solidarity through the construction of mass graves cartographies in San Carlos Town, a supporter of CARE stated:

‘In my humble opinion, one of the most terrible impacts of the war in San Carlos was that we can’t trust anybody... sounds horrible! I know! But it’s true; we are always suspicious of each other... That is the reason, in my opinion anyway, that the work that we are doing in CARE is so important for the community! All these cartographies are saying to the people of the town that we can do something together to overcome the war and be a solid community again; and when we share personal and private information with the community I think it is a way to say out loud: hey! I would like to trust in you again!’⁶¹.

Enforced disappearances inflicted extreme suffering on local communities. Feelings of uncertainty and the incapacity of families to find closure and come into terms with the disappearance of their loved ones are further negative outcomes. Boss and Dahl⁶² established that this emotional incapacity can produce collective and individual processes of *ambiguous loss*, that it is the process of unresolved grief and the inability to move forward that can occur when there is no verification of a missing person's status as alive or dead. Without knowing if the missing person will come back, the grief process is “frozen” and so is the mourning process. The uncertainty can last for years or decades, leaving victims’ families in a kind of limbo, hoping against hope, and unable to say goodbye. With respect to this issue of uncertainty, an affiliate to CARE expressed:

‘I have been waiting for Marcela’s return for five years. During this time I have been waking up early every morning to cook her favourite food because I hoped that today can be the day that she finally comes back home. My friends say that I’m a loony, that I’m wasting my time; that I have to move on with my life and get another wife. But I can’t, definitely I can’t. What if she comes back tomorrow? What if she is still alive? When we got married I promised her in our wedding ceremony that I will take

care of her ‘until death do us part’ and I don’t know if she is dead or not. My life is an abyss of sadness; totally empty... the only thing that I want is to find my wife’⁶³.

In this context, it is clear that the construction of these cartographies from a victims’ perspective is facilitating processes of collective and individual grief, providing emotional healing to the victims through actions of social solidarity and affection. Beer and Koster⁶⁴ expressed that social solidarity is founded on a feeling of care, responsibility, and duty towards another person (for our case victims), closely related to human values including altruism, humanity, benevolence, and community spirit. However, Gatti and Martinez⁶⁵ have argued the need to critically rethink the borders between life and death and the intersections between those two states. In particular, Gatti⁶⁶ argued that what we have called ‘social disappearance’ is in fact an overlapping between the two states (life and death), which manifest in bad deaths and bad lives, in lives that are not *really* lives. The next narrative can provide an example about the complexity of sharing information as an expression of social solidarity and the emotional impact for the families in this overlapping between life and death:

‘My sister disappeared four years ago. She was thirteen years old. I have spent all this time begging God to find her alive. I went every day to the church to say to God ‘Please, my Lord, bring my sister back safe; please my God, bring her back to me’. I have prayed with all the forces of my heart and soul during these years. But suddenly, she was found in a mass grave a month ago thanks to the information on one of these cartographies. People in town said to me all the time that I have to feel happy and relieved now; but I think that these words are just bollocks! I have a huge and deep pain in my heart, and I’m still feeling anger and frustration... All these prayers for nothing! All this faith and begging just to get my ass kicked by God... I didn’t want to find the dead body of my sister in a mass grave; I wanted her alive! Fuck off the truth and the reasons why the Colombian army killed her! I don’t care, I really don’t care, I just want her alive!’⁶⁷.

Nevertheless, the emotional individual impulse to collecting information about the location of mass graves in the territory, beyond the trauma and pain this can bring for the victims’ family, reveals an important sense of empathy for the others. In different words, this individual social solidarity action is the consequence of the ability to imagine ourselves in someone else’s shoes, and understand how difficult it can be to remain unable to find closure and ‘come in terms’ with the disappearance of a relative or a loved one. As the next quote states, it can be also an expression of moral duty:

‘I guess that I gave information about the location of the mass grave in El Jardín (rural area of San Carlos town) because I have a moral duty with the victims of San Carlos. Can I tell you something? I have been thinking recently that it could be absolutely awful if one member of my family disappears and I can’t get any information for years; awful isn’t it? Somebody in the town told me recently that when a family member disappears that the family is totally devastated; and I can’t imagine all the pain and suffering that these people have to go through. I think that it is my duty to help these families if I can; it’s my responsibility, my obligation. In my opinion, if we want to be happy in San Carlos again, if we want to improve as a community, the first step is to start helping each other again’⁶⁸.

After analysing this particular case, I argue that actions of social solidarity, expressed by sharing information, are helping people from Eastern Antioquia to recover emotionally from the consequences of the armed conflict, and helping the implementation of the transitional justice process from an unofficial perspective. The action of sharing information about where the missing people could be buried is promoted by the victims (not by the state) highlighting how civil society can organise in ways beyond the expected official frameworks. In other words, social bonds matter and those particular actions of social solidarity are the glue which hold groups of victims together in this Colombian region. In regard to how these actions of sharing information and recovering missing people is also a political practice, Schwartz-Martin and Cruz-Santiago⁶⁹ and Cruz-Santiago⁷⁰ established that these actions aim to break the State’s monopoly over the dead and their bodies. It is also to understand the knowledge production of the subjugated, people who are oppressed by the inoperative justice system. In time, they

constitute themselves into *victims-citizens* who are facing impunity and authorities' 'epistemological ignorance' in the face of humanitarian crisis.

Thus, the right to know acts as a catalyst for victims to exercise social solidarity actions by expressing private suffering in public, democratizing the pain within local communities, and facilitating actions of affection and recognition in transitional justice contexts. In order to understand how these actions of social solidarity can provide emotional healing in transitional justice times, the next quote is revealing:

'I spent many years trying to find her without any luck. I thought that my daughter had run away because she was upset with me. But the truth was that the guerrillas abducted and killed her because they thought that Cristina was part of the paramilitaries groups in the region, what stupidity! But you know what? I have feelings of gratitude to the people of San Carlos that brought pieces of information to CARE, because thanks to this information I found my daughter in a mass grave and I could stop my own suffering. I know now that she is dead and for me it's an enormous relief... The moment that I received her bones and ashes in a plastic bag two years ago all my pain and sorrow disappeared, because finally all the uncertainty finished. It's a huge relief that I can go to the cemetery every day and pray for her, and guess what? I don't have nightmares anymore'⁷¹.

After categorising the interviews conducted by this research in clusters of information, it has emerged that the elaboration of collaborative mass graves cartographies is generating a double process of social solidarity and recognition in Eastern Antioquia. The first process is that the person who shares data about the location of mass graves with the community is recognising the traumatic experience of others, and this process of social solidarity is producing, at the same time, an open expression of empathy through the construction of communal knowledge. This individual member of the community is stressing with a solidaristic action that the other member is different (in this case is suffering from a process of *ambiguous loss*), that they need assistance, and the action of social solidarity of sharing information to construct public knowledge, is a way of recognising private pain in public in order to help deal it. More fundamentally, victims and perpetrators are generating also an intersubjective process of social solidarity, and they are recognising their need for forgiveness and support in an encounter with one another. In order to comprehend this particular process of social solidarity and recognition, this narrative of one of the associates of CARE is illustrative:

'Creating these cartographies, my first big surprise was to start receiving help from some former members of paramilitary groups in the region. Can you imagine my surprise? The people that kidnapped and killed our loved ones trying to help us now! But, at the end of the day, these are the people that know where the mass graves are; and we needed them for this task. At the beginning, I couldn't tell anybody in town about this; but after a couple of months, and finding two mass graves thanks to this information, I started thinking: 'well, this person is finally doing something good for us!' One day I asked him the reasons for helping us, and he said that he was looking for forgiveness and a place in our community; a kind of second chance I guess. But after that conversation I realised that it was a win-win situation, I can recognise him as part of our community now and he is finally doing something good for the wellbeing of our town'⁷².

The second process of social solidarity is that the victim that receives information about the location of the mass grave is recognising the action of social solidarity from the people of their community. This exchange of knowledge and information can improve social cohesion inside local communities, and it is crucial for helping reconciliation and reparation in transitional justice contexts. As a result, this double process of social solidarity and recognition is highlighting Honneth's⁷³ and Kapeller and Wolkenstein's⁷⁴ ideas of comprehending social solidarity as a synthesis of instrumental and empathic recognition in particular contested contexts, where developing actions of social solidarity can be understood as the consequence of humanistic emotions rather than instrumental considerations. In sum, it is clear that the cooperative construction of knowledge and information to develop mass graves cartographies between victims, civilians, and perpetrators is not just a simple instrumental action of

social solidarity. It is also a sociological process that is shaping and underpinning novel forms of recognition and symbolic reparation, and assisting the achievements of transitional justice mechanisms in Eastern Antioquia's communities from an unofficial perspective.

Social solidarity and contested versions about the past in transitional justice times

The construction of narratives about the Colombian armed conflict is a transitional justice situation where a diversity of social actors (particularly victims) are struggling to revisit the past and contesting power relations around the construction of collective remembrance. In short, the phrase 'history is written by the victors' could be most accurate in addressing the relationship between the construction of collective memories in post-conflict Colombia, and the power associations around the establishment of official narratives of the past⁷⁵. This sentence reveals also how the category of power defines who is allowed to write the narratives of what happened at the end of war hostilities. In order to establish clear understanding about what occurred in almost six decades of armed conflict in Colombia, it is important to note that there is a field of continuous tension between *official narratives* about the war waged by the Colombian government, the Colombian army, Paramilitary groups and Guerrilla groups ('the official warriors'), and *unofficial narratives* created by civil society organizations, NGOs, social movements, human rights defenders, civilians or victims ('the unofficial war actors').

This tension between official and unofficial narratives demonstrates how collective constructions of memory, collaborative constitution of narratives, and particular reconstructions of the past are set in place by agents, actors, and institutions that have their own political and social agendas⁷⁶. The final aim of official and unofficial actors and institutions is to establish in the country's collective consciousness a particular set of views about what happened during the war; shaping specific social contexts and meanings according to their distinctive values, narratives, and identities⁷⁷. Furthermore, this tension is a part of transitional justice scenarios in which the clash of diverse sets of values defines positions of solidarity, power, recognition, and visibility inside contexts of transition⁷⁸.

Regarding the actual process of transitional justice that Colombia is experiencing at the moment, I argue that the project '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*' is promoting social solidarity by recognising the production of collaborative information as a social and generational institution with which to demand truth, justice, and guarantees of non-recurrence from an unofficial perspective. It is also supporting alternative ways of explaining the violence of the past to new generations, who do not have previous knowledge of it. As a result, this initiative becomes an expression of social solidarity, cultural belonging and affection that shapes new social dynamics of association, recognition, and post-conflict reconciliation in Eastern Antioquia. Thus, it is relevant to stress how the initiative '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*' is providing information to communities that do not have access to different, contested, or unofficial perspectives about the violent past, and in particular victims' views. Moreover, the production of knowledge from a victims' perspective, in this case, can be understood as an expression of social solidarity in post-conflict societies; this construction of knowledge is catalysing practices of reparation in the on-going process of transitional justice in Colombia. The following example of the 'false positives' (*falsos positivos*) will illustrate these arguments further.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most devastating outcomes of the former Colombian armed conflict is the number of disappeared and missing people. According to the NCHM⁷⁹ and the International Committee of the Red Cross⁸⁰, the armed conflict left 82,998 people missing from 1958 to 2018. To put this in perspective, this is more people missing than all those registered during the dictatorship years in the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. The amount of people missing in Colombia could fill two professional football pitches, or occupy almost the capacity of Wembley Stadium in London, where 79,288 of the missing are civilians and 3,710 are former combatants⁸¹. It is often unclear who disappeared these victims and, without a doubt, the most critical humanitarian challenge currently facing Colombia during its current transitional justice processes is helping to find the people who have disappeared because of the conflict.

According to the report on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions in Colombia, commissioned by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – OHCHR⁸² –, from 2004 one of the strategies of the Colombian army to ‘win the war’ was the implementation of a phenomenon of so-called ‘false positives’ (*falsos positivos*). This was the act of murdering civilians, but where the security forces would make it look as if they had been killed in combat, or that they were guerrillas or criminals, and therefore had been killed lawfully. International NGOs, including Amnesty International⁸³ and Human Rights Watch⁸⁴, have argued that evidence exists of this phenomenon since 1980 and that it is an example of an intentional and deliberate state policy of killing civilians in the midst of the armed conflict.

The methods involved the use of paid ‘recruiters’ (usually a civilian, demobilized armed group member or former soldier) who would trap people under false pretences (by offering a job, for example), then move them to a remote location, where they would be killed by members of the Colombian army, often within a matter of hours or days since they were last seen by family members. After that, civilian victims were presented as guerrilla members by “informers” (civilians, demobilized armed group members or former soldiers), who identified the victims in exchange for money. Once these victims were killed, military forces set up the scene to make it appear as if it were a lawful combat killing, involving placing arms and weapons in the hands of victims, firing weapons from victims’ hands, changing their clothes to clothing associated with guerrillas or putting combat boots on victims’ feet. At the end, the civilian victims were reported by the Colombian army in press conferences as guerrilla members killed in combat. Victims were often buried without being identified and some were buried in communal mass graves⁸⁵.

According to the United Nations, 44% of the *falsos positivos* cases happened in Eastern Antioquia, where the towns of Granada, Cocorná, San Francisco, San Carlos, Argelia and Guarne were most affected⁸⁶. The Colombian army denied for decades this unlawful strategy, and the official narrative was that ‘false positives’ was a ludicrous invention of human rights NGOs and left-wing political groups in the country. As a result of the implementation of the ‘*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*’ in San Carlos Town, and the information collected by the community as expressions of social solidarity, it is now possible to confront this official version and demand the truth about what really happened. The narrative below is important in that it presents victims’ perspectives and contests official versions of what happened:

‘My son was abducted on 31st of August 2002 by the fourth division of the Colombian National Army when he was on his way to work on a local farm close to Guarne town. They killed him and changed his clothes for a guerrilla camouflage suit. After that, the Colombian army introduced him as a *guerrillero* in a press conference in Santa Ana; a rural area close to Granada town. How can I trust the government and the army after that? How can I claim justice when the legal system always protects the Colombian army? The worst thing is that in the eyes of the state my son is another *guerrillero killed in an operation against FARC*, when the truth is that he was just another normal working peasant from Guarne and the father of two kids... After that how can I believe in the legal system in Colombia? Who can protect me from the state?’⁸⁷.

According to Amnesty International⁸⁸ and the NCHM⁸⁹, one of the main reasons for these extrajudicial killings was the pressure the Colombian government placed on the military units to present results to the public and demonstrate that the government was winning the armed conflict against the guerrillas. Consequently, for Colombian military forces success was often associated with enemy *body counts*; the number of guerrilla members killed in combat by military units. Some Colombian NGOs argued that these summary executions contributed to the targeting of human rights defenders, trade unionists, peasants and indigenous communities. The justification was that these social groups were ‘the usual suspects’ to associate with guerrilla groups according to the Colombian army during the years of the war⁹⁰.

In this context, I argue that it is clear that the tension between official and unofficial narratives over the phenomenon of the ‘false positives’ emphasises how constructions about what happened during the Colombian armed conflict are set in place by agents, actors or institutions that have their own political, social, and cultural agendas. Therefore, it is crucial to present victims’ perspectives and narratives through initiatives such as the *‘Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves’* to accentuate the social solidarity inside victims’ groups, and promote processes of local reconciliation from a civil society perspective. Furthermore, presenting victims’ views can challenge positions of power and public assumptions about the behaviour of official institutions in the country. As a victim of ‘false positives’, who was involved in the collaborative project *‘Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves’*, expresses:

‘I have been thinking for all these years why the Colombian army always killed and abducted peasants and poor people of my town to then present them as ‘false positives’... Why not the local politicians, or posh people or people with money? You know what? These soldiers just want to receive promotions, money or medals for killing *guerrilleros*, don’t they? So I assume that my husband just represented to them other 200,000 Colombian pesos for their pockets or a holiday at the sea side... Why do the people in my town don’t believe that my husband was a peasant and not a guerrilla supporter? Easy, because he was a peasant; not a politician... His only sin was to be a peasant, a land worker, and during this time the Colombian army is trying to convince everybody that all the peasants and *campesinos* of Eastern Antioquia are *guerrilleros*... and you know why? Because it’s more money for them; for the Colombian army every peasant of Eastern Antioquia is a cheque for \$200.000 Colombian pesos’⁹¹.

It is clear that questions of power, ideology and authority do not just simply ‘evaporate’ by giving voice or visibility to the victims of the former Colombian armed conflict in the midst of the actual transitional justice process. The construction of knowledge and information from a victims’ perspective in post-conflict Colombia is a struggle over power and the exercise of this power to shape collective representations and meanings of the past, with important connections to the creation of subjectivities, narratives and values in the present. The challenge in transitional justice times is to understand how victims can access or exercise different levels of symbolic power as a result of producing collaborative knowledge, in order to shape new meanings of the past that can affect narratives of the present. In other words, the question about how to change power relations between social actors, historical institutions, and political concepts from a social solidarity perspective could be the key to understanding the future construction of symbolic power, victims’ reparation, and the role of social solidarity in post-conflict Colombia.

After analysing the case of *‘Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves’*, and following Featherstone⁹² and Juul⁹³ theoretical perspectives, I argue that this initiative is an example of exercising social solidarity as political power in the public sphere. This particular case illustrates also how subjectivity, emotions, and empowerment are a social agency that can generate collective actions through victims’ construction of collaborative knowledge in transitional justice scenarios. This project demonstrates how feelings such as pain, suffering, and rage can motivate challenges to official versions about the past, with encouragement to take part in actions of social solidarity to mobilise resources and make a claim for truth, recognition, and justice. It therefore confirms that actions of social solidarity are not just a rational or formal approach; it can also combine different substantive levels of subjectivity. As a result, *‘Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves’* is a good example of the relevance of emotions as a key element behind actions of social solidarity in transitional justice contexts.

Conclusion

This article began by outlining the concept of social solidarity, re-examining the relationship between social solidarity and transitional justice. It went on to establish how the field of transitional justice lacks a comprehensive account of the role that social solidarity plays in transitional justice. It demonstrated that social solidarity is a novel perspective and a crucial dimension to develop transitional justice

processes in post-conflict societies from a victims' perspective. It has reviewed the characteristics of the former Colombian armed conflict, focusing on the region of Eastern Antioquia and its victims' organisations' initiatives. It has analysed the case of '*Cartography and Identification of Mass Graves*', a victims' collaborative project based on social solidarity to identify burial sites and mass graves where missing people of the Colombian armed conflict could be buried. It has been argued that this effort based on social solidarity is an innovative tool to demand truth, justice, and recognition in the on-going process of transitional justice in Colombia. Importantly, the article stresses the relevance of understanding social solidarity as a crucial dimension of transitional justice, and by what means victims' social agency in conducting collaborative collective actions supports inclusive processes of DDR beyond official narratives and agendas.

This article has also emphasised that local practices of victims' social solidarity indicate that civil society groups are exercising unofficial approaches to contest official narratives about the past, emphasising that the pursuit of justice, truth, and guarantees of non-recurrence in transitional justice contexts are more dynamic and contested than the positive narrative of post-conflict implies. For this reason, one of the challenges remains how to establish more victims' social solidarity initiatives that can help other local communities in Colombia to challenge official narratives and support inclusive processes of transitional justice. Thus, the importance of understanding victims' communities as social solidarity producers in transitional justice processes rests on the moral idea that it is a historical obligation to dignify the victims and survivors of traumatic events, even if those victims do not share official political positions or mainstream ideological views after the war.

The principal aim of addressing social solidarity as a central dimension of transitional justice is to provide introspection about how victims must define, promote, and inform public debate about reconciliation, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence; understanding victims as subjects with their own agency, projects, priorities, and organisational ability. To conclude, comprehending victims' social agency in conducting collaborative collective actions of social solidarity, in order to support inclusive processes of DDR beyond official narratives and agendas, is crucial. Addressing social solidarity as a central element for transitional justice contexts could be the key to understanding the real impact of transitional justice in post-conflict Colombia.

Note

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