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INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT INTO TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN THE GAMBIA

Practitioner Perspectives

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Centre for the Study of
Violence and Reconciliation



GIJTR

Global Initiative for Justice,
Truth & Reconciliation

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INTRODUCTION

In countries dealing with legacies of gross and systematic rights violations, healing is central to individuals, communities and society coming to terms with past abuses and preventing their recurrence in the future. As such, it is a key component of transitional justice. The African Union Transitional Justice Policy (AUTJP), adopted in 2019, defines transitional justice as “the various (formal and traditional or non-formal) policy measures and institutional mechanisms that societies, through an inclusive consultative process, adopt in order to overcome past violations, divisions and inequalities and to create conditions for both security and democratic and socio-economic transformation” (para. 19). The policy points to healing as both a component and a desired outcome of transitional justice measures, noting that healing is “the process by which affected individuals and communities mend the physical and psychological wounds that they have suffered and recover from the emotional and moral effects of violence” (para. 65(ii)).

Following the African model of transitional justice presented in the AUTJP, this report identifies ways to conceptualise and integrate healing, particularly from psychological wounds, into holistic and contextualised transitional justice practice on the continent. The report draws on reflections from African practitioners engaging with transitional justice issues in The Gambia to share lessons learnt with civil society and other actors seeking to do similar work in the region and beyond. It is based on interviews with practitioners at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), as well as their partners in civil society and at the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission in The Gambia.

The report begins by outlining CSVR’s contextual approach to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in transitional contexts, which is informed by its work with the African Union, African transitional justice practitioners, individuals and communities affected by past abuses, and other stakeholders on the continent. MHPSS is vital, as a key component of the AUTJP is promoting individual and collective healing, as well as non-recurrence of conflict and violations. The aim of MHPSS is to promote the psychosocial well-being of individuals or collectives by allowing them to process what has happened to them, release the anger, pain and resentment related to this, potentially forgive those who are responsible for the violation, let go of the need for revenge and begin to rebuild their lives. It can also help promote reconciliation by allowing people to understand, acknowledge and accept the various roles they may have played in past abuses and how they and others have been affected by them. Through MHPSS interventions, individuals and collectives can have the opportunity to begin their healing processes, with the result that they may be less likely to perpetrate future abuses and thus help break the cycle of violence seen in many countries.

The report then briefly describes The Gambia’s transitional justice process to date and CSVR’s engagements with this process in collaboration with its partners in the country. It concludes by presenting a range of lessons these practitioners have learnt in the process of designing and implementing locally guided, tailored and sustainable activities that amplify local knowledge and practices, rather than dampening them with external expertise. These lessons were learnt through reflection and adaptation, as part of an ongoing learning process that continues to this day.

CSVr'S APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN TRANSITIONAL CONTEXTS

A South African organisation, CSVr has been working on transitional justice issues for nearly 30 years. This work began in the 1990s, as South Africa undertook its transition from apartheid to democracy and established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with past abuses. After engaging with the commission until its closing in 2002, CSVr and its local partners continued to follow up on the 'unfinished business' of the transition, particularly regarding reparations, accountability and social transformation in the country. Based on its experience in South Africa, the organisation expanded its work to the rest of the continent in the mid-2000s. It has been promoting a holistic, contextual and inclusive approach to transitional justice on the continent, which is informed by African experiences and led by African stakeholders.

CSVr provides technical assistance to the African Union in the development, adoption, dissemination and implementation of the AUTJP. It works with like-minded civil society partners on the continent to articulate approaches to transitional justice that acknowledge and respond to challenges specific to African contexts. It also offers on-the-ground technical support and knowledge exchange to civil society organisations, victims' groups, policy makers and state institutions in several African countries embarking on transitional justice processes, including Sudan, South Sudan and Guinea, in addition to The Gambia. This work at multiple levels and with diverse stakeholders continues to be informed

by CSVr's experience of working directly with people affected by apartheid-era abuses and their ongoing effects in South Africa, including through research, evidence-based advocacy, individual and group counselling, and collaborations and capacity building programmes with community-based change agents and psychosocial supporters.¹

CSVr has integrated MHPSS into all aspects of its work in South Africa and the region, recognising that redressing past violations requires addressing the causes and impacts of trauma in a way that bridges individual, family, community and national experiences. CSVr uses a psychosocial approach that looks at individuals in the context of the combined influence that psychological factors and the surrounding social environment have on their physical and mental wellness and their ability to function.² In line with the multi-tiered approach of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, CSVr engages with mental health and psychosocial needs at multiple levels (Figure 1).³ According to this approach, people's social environment not only affects their mental health but also shapes the MHPSS intervention that is most suitable for the challenges they face.

Working with past trauma and its manifestations in the present calls for a variety of tiered forms of psychosocial support, depending on the extent and severity of the psychological impacts of the trauma. This approach extends beyond the one-

1 For more information, see CSVr's website: <https://www.csvr.org.za>.

2 See Kath Woodward, *Psychosocial Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2015).

3 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *IASC Guidelines for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings* (2007), https://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/9781424334445/en/ (accessed 1 September 2020).

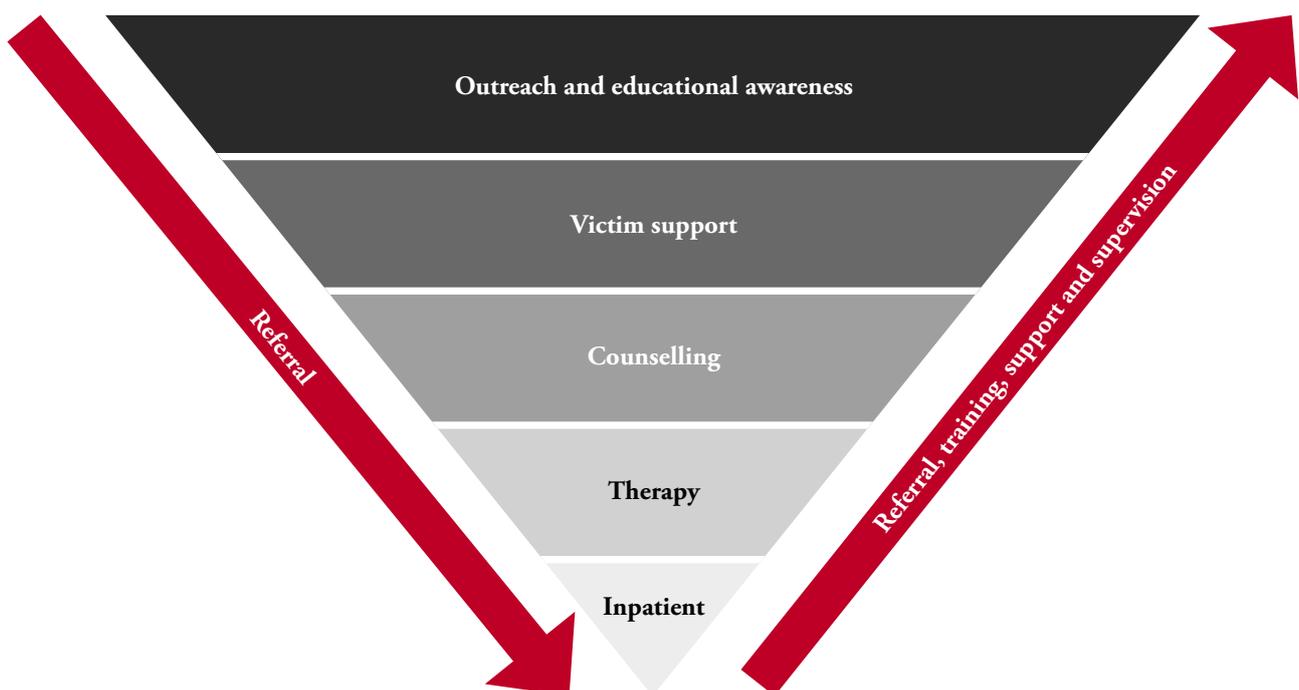
on-one therapeutic model, taking into account the relationship between the individual and the collective by incorporating a community-based view of healing. It also avoids one-size-fits-all interventions, relying instead on context-specific engagements. This is particularly important in countries undertaking transitional justice processes, which deal with the societal legacies of past abuses and the historical, cultural, political and other specificities that shape them. These contexts are often marked by distinct historical injustices and forms of socioeconomic exclusion, which exacerbate the triggers and effects of trauma among marginalised populations affected by violence. They therefore require a nuanced understanding of the mental health effects of such legacies, which are dependent on cultural beliefs related to mental health. With this understanding, CSVR advocates for integrating an MHPSS lens into all aspects and mechanisms of transitional justice, instead of treating psychosocial issues as an add-on, an element of reparations or the concern of specialists alone.

CSVr has sought to expand and adapt existing therapeutic models in order to respond to African needs and challenges, first in South Africa and now

in diverse contexts on the continent. In building relationships and working closely with affected communities and individuals over the years, CSVr practitioners have recognised the need to acknowledge the influence of factors common to African contexts, which may include cultural values, the legacies of colonialism, liberation struggles and postcolonial development challenges, and contestations related to ethnicity, religion and other identity-based factors, among others. These regional experiences shape the social environment and the psychological factors that affect people's physical and mental wellness, in combination with family, community and national specificities.

As such, CSVr approaches its MHPSS work as an organisation grounded in the African context. This orientation both informs and reflects its collaborative efforts to develop African approaches to transitional justice, which similarly acknowledge regional commonalities while accommodating local specificities. Although contested, transitional justice as a field is largely accepted and legitimated, whereas efforts to address mental health and psychosocial needs are still somewhat marginalised. Given the holistic approach embraced in the AUTJP,

Figure 1. A Multi-Tiered Approach to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services



transitional justice on the continent can be an avenue for raising awareness about mental health issues and the need for psychosocial support services in transitional contexts and beyond.

Since the 1990s, CSVR has been working to develop and integrate these two fields, and help apply

them in a locally relevant way. It has been doing so with a network of African practitioners with a wide range of expertise and country experiences. As CSVR learns from these engagements, it continues to elaborate and refine its approach. The following section outlines efforts in this regard in The Gambia, in order to put the lessons learnt in context.

SUPPORTING THE GAMBIAN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE PROCESS

CSVR has been engaging with the transitional justice process in The Gambia since it first became a viable possibility in 2016–17. The Gambian process is designed to address gross human rights violations and repression committed under Yahya Jammeh’s dictatorship, which began with a coup in 1994 and ended with electoral defeat in 2017. The regime was characterised by extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence, detention without trial and other abuses, largely carried out by state security forces. It aimed to silence dissidents, many of whom eventually fled the country. The regime also deepened divisions among ethnic groups in the country, particularly between the minority Jola and the majority Mandinka. Many Gambians perceived Jammeh to have favoured his own ethnic group, the Jola, and contributed to the political and socioeconomic marginalisation of the Mandinka and Fula. The regime moreover engaged in widespread economic crimes, including land seizures, embezzlement and endemic corruption.

Following the controversial presidential elections of December 2016, Jammeh conceded defeat to Adama Barrow in January 2017. In December 2017, the new government passed the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) Act, as part of a National Transitional Justice Plan. The plan includes processes such as the Constitutional Review Commission, the Commission of Inquiry into the Financial Activities of Public Bodies, Enterprises and Offices, security sector reform and, potentially, prosecutions. With a mandate to “investigate and

establish an impartial historical record of the nature, causes and extent of violations and abuses of human rights committed during the period July 1994 to January 2017 and to consider the granting of reparations to victims and for connected matters,”⁴ the TRRC began its operations in September 2018 and commenced public hearings in January 2019.⁵

CSVR practitioners began engaging with Gambian government officials and civil society representatives in 2016, during African Union events related to the development of the AUTJP. After hosting Gambian officials on a transitional justice study tour in South Africa, where CSVR practitioners shared their ideas on integrating MHPSS and transitional justice, CSVR continued serving as a sounding board for their ideas on transitional justice. Based on these relationships, a CSVR team conducted a preliminary needs assessment with state and civil society actors in The Gambia in 2017. This exercise demonstrated that in addition to seeking support with the conceptualisation and implementation of a transitional justice process that meets local needs, these actors had begun to acknowledge the significant capacity and resource gap in the country’s MHPSS.

The assessment showed that, as a result of ‘brain drain’ and uneven development under the Jammeh regime, The Gambia has only a small handful of qualified MHPSS practitioners. It also indicated that mental health issues are largely stigmatised and pathologised among the population, based on a

4 Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission Act, 2017.

5 See, Mustapha K. Darboe, “One Year of Truth-Telling in The Gambia,” Justice Info, 13 January 2020, <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/truth-commissions/43511-one-year-truth-telling-gambia.html> (accessed 22 July 2020); Niklas Hultin, “Waiting and Political Transitions: Anticipating the New Gambia,” *Critical African Studies* 12: 93–106.

widespread belief that they are a sign of madness or a test or punishment from a higher power. For this reason, many Gambians are reluctant to view their struggles as related to mental health and therefore to seek counselling, or be seen to seek it. This is particularly the case among survivors of gross human rights violations, who may already face the stigma of being victimised, especially if they were subjected to sexual and gender-based violence. Many furthermore disengage from processes that advance mental health terms such as trauma, depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. Given the extent and degree of the abuses committed under the dictatorship, however, local actors emphasised the importance of developing a framework and infrastructure for MHPSS in the country, particularly for victims of past abuses, in addition to raising awareness of mental health needs among the wider population.

While staying in regular contact with officials at the Ministry of Justice throughout the promulgation of the TRRC Act and the commission's design, as well as with civil society and victims' groups in Banjul, CSVR practitioners focused on identifying programmatic and funding opportunities that would enable them to offer the type of psychosocial support that was needed, as a component of broader transitional justice support. As a result of their access to officials at the African Union and in the Gambian government, and their close relationships with civil society and community-based stakeholders, CSVR practitioners had a degree of legitimacy at the local level that foreign organisations rarely achieve. This legitimacy was further bolstered by CSVR's long-standing experience of partnering with communities affected by past abuses in South Africa, and its reputation for tailoring its engagements to local needs as an organisation grounded in the African context.

As the TRRC's public hearings began, CSVR started a project with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to support the transitional justice process in The Gambia, as part of the Global Initiative

for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation.⁶ Beginning with a more extensive 10-day needs assessment, this ongoing collaboration has resulted in a series of tailored workshops and trainings on transitional justice—guided by the African approach outlined in the AUTJP—with Ministry of Justice personnel, TRRC staff and a range of civil society representatives, including human rights organisations, community-based initiatives and victims' groups. In addition to promoting discussion on contextualising transitional justice in The Gambia, CSVR has focused on sharing its approach to MHPSS in these processes.

In addition, CSVR signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Justice to second a counselling psychologist to the TRRC. The counselling psychologist has provided technical support to the TRRC by guiding the development of the Victim Support Unit's psychosocial support documentation processes and offering counselling to victims approaching the TRRC, while building debriefing and self-care practices among commission staff. She has also worked to strengthen the psychosocial support referral pathways for victims through trainings and supervision not only at the TRRC Victim Support Unit but also with the main victims' organisation, the Gambia Centre for Victims of Human Rights Violations, and other established and emerging civil society groups in the capital Banjul and increasingly in rural areas. She and other CSVR practitioners have consistently promoted CSVR's contextualised approach, building on existing understandings of healing and interpersonal support in local contexts.

CSVr's approach in The Gambia has been to accompany local partners as they design and implement their work, following their lead on what information, experience and support they require, participating in mutual learning, and seeking to ensure the sustainability of these interventions once CSVr practitioners decrease the amount of time they spend in the country. This approach emphasises the value of local knowledge and practices, while

6 For more information and reflections on this project, see, Sufiya Bray and Milica Kostić, "Supporting Transitional Justice Processes in the Gambia," in *Pathways of Innovation: Civil Society Advancing Transitional Justice*, ed. Simon Robins (New York: International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, 2020).

aiming for equality in the relationship between CSVN practitioners and local stakeholders, as well as broad-based inclusion and participation of affected individuals and communities in the development

of activities. The following section presents lessons learnt by CSVN practitioners and their partners through their work in The Gambia, including what they themselves are seeking to do better.

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AS PART OF TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Contextualised support for transitional justice processes—and for MHPSS as an integral part of those processes—calls for practitioners to have an in-depth understanding of the local context and tailor their activities accordingly. Each context, as the situation evolves, will determine the degree and type of support that is needed, as well as the efforts required to ensure the sustainability of the outcomes.

Contextualising Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

While individuals dealing with trauma present similarly worldwide, the challenge lies in helping them understand trauma and its effects and then assisting them to heal in their everyday context. The guidelines that accompany the Western therapeutic model and other approaches are useful, but experience shows that the practice needs to be adapted to each context.

“You can’t use the same approach for everyone, especially if the beneficiaries are from different backgrounds. The main thing is investing time—you need patience, adaptability, cultural sensitivity and good listening skills.”

Priscilla Yagu Ciesay, Women’s Association for Women’s Empowerment Gambia

Lessons learnt:

1. Trauma can be individual and collective, and it can be experienced directly or indirectly. MHPSS services deal with both the trauma of the past and how it affects the present. Practitioners must also be cognizant of how present circumstances (political, social, economic) influence the experience of, and healing from, past trauma. As all of these factors are contextual, practitioners should first focus on learning about the specificities of the local context and then adapt their approach.
2. Experience indicates that individuals and communities are often doing a great deal locally to support each other through crises and promote resilience and healing. These practices may not be framed as MHPSS, but they often have similar benefits. Having learnt about local practices and the spaces in which they occur, practitioners should seek to amplify them, as long as they are not harmful. The key is not to impose a new approach but rather to integrate MHPSS in a way that enhances existing practices and resources. Instead of overpowering and dampening local efforts with external expertise, the aim is empowerment—helping people help themselves. This occurs through a combination of raising awareness, strengthening community-based support, building confidence, nurturing resilience and offering new skills. In The Gambia, this involved identifying spaces where people gathered, such as bantabas or ataya circles, and integrating MHPSS through psychoeducation and promoting sharing that allows individuals to understand they are not alone in experiencing violations.
3. Practitioners should adapt the language they use to describe MHPSS to their audience. By avoiding technical terms such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and rather using accessible language and terms such as ‘healing’ or ‘restoration’—or other terms that are already in use in each community context—practitioners are

often more likely to attract buy-in, promote understanding of the process and enable healing at the individual, community and national level. This also entails using local languages.

4. Part of using contextualised language is that it may often be more beneficial to encourage individuals and groups to speak about their trauma indirectly. Talking explicitly about a psychological wound may cause some to disengage in order to protect themselves. In these cases, practitioners might use body representation instead of focusing on emotions or events (e.g., speaking about a tightness in the chest, rather than anxiety) to demonstrate the very normal impacts that trauma has on people. This becomes useful in helping individuals acknowledge that they were affected by what they experienced. Body mapping can be a helpful tool in this regard.
5. Experiences and understandings of trauma and healing are affected by demographic factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion and geographic location. In learning about a context, practitioners should seek to understand the local impacts of demographics, which may vary among individuals and from community to community.
6. Practitioners may need to adapt their approach based on demographic markers. In patriarchal contexts, for example, it may be preferable for men practitioners to work with men and women practitioners to work with women, both individually and in groups, in order to establish common ground and trust. Children may also require separate attention. After the initial separation, these different individuals and groups can be brought together. This may be a beneficial approach in both family and community work, particularly in countries where a cultural hierarchy may prevent certain people from speaking in the presence of an elder or male. The same applies to different ethnic or religious groups, for example. However, each individual should be consulted beforehand, as they may have different preferences (e.g., men who have been subjected to sexual violence by other men may prefer to work with women practitioners).

7. Clients benefit from one-on-one counselling, but many may be reluctant to seek out this type of support. Group interventions may be a more accessible way for many clients to engage with trauma, in addition to being more feasible from a budgetary and human resource perspective. Working in a group also helps create a sense of trust and connection, which counters the tendency of traumatised individuals to mistrust and feel disconnected from both themselves and others.

“Transitional justice usually deals with collective or national trauma, but it doesn’t look at trauma’s impact on the personal and family level. ... But a transitional justice process can open up the opportunity for deeper change through mental health and psychosocial support, it can be an opportunity for transformation.”

Sara Bradshaw, GIJTR

8. Providing information or assistance with subsistence and livelihood issues (e.g., doctor’s or school fees) is also a way to bring people together, which can then be used as a platform to engage with mental health issues. Because socioeconomic marginalisation can exacerbate trauma and is a common feature of transitional contexts, practitioners may work to raise awareness of the connection between the two and address them simultaneously. As many practitioners have acknowledged and experienced, it can be both counterintuitive and extremely challenging to work on an individual’s trauma if the social context is economically precarious, unstable or unsafe.
9. If practitioners work with individuals and groups over an extended period, they will need to adjust their approach and practices to shifts among the clients and in the local context, including by pushing beyond initial trauma narratives to new areas to keep the engagement generative.
10. Practitioners may consider collaborating with a committee of local stakeholders based in different

regions and communities, first, to design a tailored approach and, second, to help build capacity to provide psychosocial support in a contextualised and sustainable way. These stakeholders would be not only trained or qualified practitioners but also trusted individuals who are already providing support to members of their communities and available to them on a consistent basis. This might include religious and traditional leaders, women leaders and schoolteachers, among others.

11. Practitioners must endeavour to be as inclusive and representative in their work with local stakeholders as the context allows, in addition to using participatory methods to promote buy-in and sustainability where possible.
12. Donors may see MHPSS as an add-on or an element of reparations, rather than a key issue in itself and an integrated aspect of all transitional justice processes. The approach outlined here requires ongoing awareness raising and advocacy with a range of actors, including donors. For example, reconciliation is a key component of transitional justice, yet individual healing (starting the process) and forgiveness are often a prerequisite for reconciliation, social cohesion and non-recurrence. In another example, the MHPSS that a family receives during an exhumation should not be considered reparations, but rather a tool that enables the family to engage with the process and find closure in the outcomes.

Investing in a Thorough Needs Assessment

A needs assessment is key for practitioners to become familiar with the local context, including stakeholders, practices and spaces that contribute to MHPSS. It is also key to identifying and building relationships with a broad range of actors, to ensure that all subsequent activities are relevant to the people and place where practitioners are working. A literature review is a requirement for any project, but it should be fleshed out with a dedicated, thorough and tailored needs assessment. This provides practitioners with deeper knowledge of local specificities—historical, cultural, demographic, political, socioeconomic—and allows them to map the main

issues, stakeholders, gatekeepers, capacities, resources and entry points for engagement at the local, subnational and national levels.

“The trauma won’t come to an end soon. The challenge has been convincing victims, especially victims of sexual and gender-based violence, to come forward because of the stigma. This type of work needs continuous intervention.”

Baba Galeh Jallow, TRRC

Lessons learnt:

1. Even before conducting an assessment or engaging in any other activities, it is useful to do a field visit. This will help practitioners get the lay of the land, make contact with stakeholders and learn about other key actors, which will help them to tailor the needs assessment and access richer, more accurate findings.
2. If a field visit is not feasible for budgetary or other reasons, practitioners need to access several key contacts in the field who can assist them to coordinate a needs assessment and introduce them to local stakeholders. This requires building relationships through formal and informal meetings in other contexts (e.g., African Union events in the case of CSVR). Practitioners can also learn about stakeholders through a literature review and online research, as well as a review of influential local commentators on social media platforms, which can be particularly useful for accessing youth and women change agents. It is important that these contacts are trusted in the local context, particularly by those affected by past abuses.
3. If practitioners have already built relationships with a local partner or several local stakeholders, collaborating with them in designing the needs assessment will result in a more tailored exercise. If they have only made initial contact, it is still useful to consult local actors on the design of the needs

assessment. This input helps guide practitioners not only regarding who to meet but also which questions they should ask to access local ideas and approaches to transitional justice and to MHPSS, including existing practices that facilitate healing and promote resilience but are not framed in terms of psychology.

4. Before and during the needs assessment, practitioners should engage with diverse stakeholders, not only those who are similar to them (e.g., CSVN's tendency has been to meet with formal civil society organisations and other actors who would commonly attend transitional justice-related workshops in urban centres). Experience shows that meetings with members of parliament, justice officials, labour union representatives, religious leaders, youth leaders, women leaders, schoolteachers and others yield a broader perspective on local needs, as well as better information on institutions and practices to work with, build on or seek to reform in subsequent activities. With regard to psychosocial support, these actors would include health officials, psychologists, student groups, victims' groups and affected communities, among others.
5. A thorough needs assessment requires two weeks, at the very least, to allow adequate time and the flexibility to meet with a wide range of stakeholders and travel to affected communities in different regions of the country.
6. Site visits outside of the major urban centres are crucial, as they provide insight into experiences, needs and demands at the subnational level, which enrich practitioners' understanding of the national context. This is particularly the case with diverse communities affected by past abuses and their legacies.
7. While the needs assessment should be guided by a design and careful planning, it also needs to be flexible enough to accommodate stakeholders' shifting schedules, emerging facts or events, and local ways of doing. Practitioners should approach the assessment as a set of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations.

8. Practitioners should also take the time to conduct participant observation, attending activities organised by local actors in order to learn and build on what is already happening locally and to work against the reputation of being an outsider who is only parachuting in for brief meetings. This approach helps build trust and relationships with local stakeholders.
9. A multidisciplinary needs assessment team, which includes several practitioners with experience in law, social work, psychology or other relevant fields, will be more effective than an individual or a team with one specialisation in accessing information on various aspects of the local context. A trained facilitator who is accustomed to working in and with communities affected by past abuses is a key member of this team.

“Victims receive support on site, while giving statements and testifying, but there is a need for follow-up afterwards, as victims will see symptoms in the months after the hearings, when they are back with their families and away from the supportive environment of the commission.”

Ebou Faye Njie, SOS Children's Village Gambia

10. The needs assessment benefits from the team sharing reflections at the end of each day, as well as debriefing with each other or a designated team member to address potential secondary trauma, given the difficulty and sensitivity of the stories that are likely to be shared during the assessment.
11. At the end of the needs assessment, practitioners should organise a one-day workshop with key local stakeholders or partners to report back on their findings, begin to fill in knowledge gaps, request feedback and secure buy-in before engaging in further activities.
12. Donors play a central role here. Practitioners may request separate funding for a thorough needs assessment and the freedom to design a separate

project and budget based on the assessment findings. Many donors are willing to accommodate grantees who make a strong case for alternative approaches. If donors require a set budget, the needs assessment should be the first project activity, and the donors should be alerted to the possibility that activities might be adapted to accommodate the findings. If donors will not fund the needs assessment, it can be incorporated into the initial activities of the project, for example in the form of a series of tailored workshops.

Tailoring Activities to an Evolving Situation

Contextualisation is central to all aspects of practitioner engagement and activities, from start to finish. Based on the findings of a thorough needs assessment, practitioners will be in a strong position to design a plan that is responsive to local challenges and needs while building on local knowledge and practices. Yet, this plan will need to include room for change, learning and adaptation.

“Community-based groups are a good resource to find people to work with. They know the locals, they already have networks. Organisations should try to reach people who do not already have access to resources. You will find that it’s usually the same type of people who attend trainings and workshops, but not necessarily the people who need them most.”

Fatou Baldeh, Women in Liberation and Leadership Gambia

Lessons learnt:

1. A contextual approach takes time. It can take more than a year for practitioners to get a good handle on the specificities of the local context and to build lasting relationships and trust, which is the point at which their engagements can begin to have a sustainable impact, particularly in relation to difficult subjects such as transitional justice and MHPSS. Practitioners should try to invest at least four years, if possible, in different types and levels of support.
2. A contextual approach requires availability and accessibility. In order to gain and maintain trust and ensure sustainability, practitioners will need to demonstrate their commitment by maintaining regular contact (in-person, telephonic, online) with partners and stakeholders and being consistently accessible in the event stakeholders have queries or require different types of support. In order to meet stakeholder expectations, practitioners should clearly determine the expectations of partners and stakeholders. After this, they should only promise what they believe they can deliver, including what they can find funding to cover. In some cases, practitioners may need to provide support without funding so as to build relationships or sustain a programme.
3. A contextual approach calls for flexibility. While guided by an overall design based on the needs assessment, the approach should be driven by an adaptable strategy that is able to respond to the needs of each phase of engagement over time. It also calls for a focus on repeated and iterative activities with individuals and groups over time, rather than one-time engagements, such as a stand-alone workshop. An aspect of this flexibility is being prepared to accommodate stakeholders changing their minds, shifting timeframes and otherwise challenging well-laid plans.
4. Practitioners should be prepared to adjust the content and processes of their activities in response to local needs. They can seek out participants’ feedback on the proceedings, adjusting the agenda day to day. The most effective way to tailor activities is to co-design them with local stakeholders and, if time and budget allow, use participatory methods to co-design them with the participants.
5. Practitioners might aim to facilitate a diverse set of activities in a range of spaces and geographic areas with diverse participants, rather than using the standard format of a few workshops and trainings, which tend to attract a specific type of participant

(e.g., representatives of formal civil society organisations or issue-focused government officials). It may also be beneficial to coordinate separate activities that are tailored to fit the needs and knowledge of different actors—victims, lawyers, social workers, psychologists, government officials—and then bring members of these groups together through combined activities at a later stage.

6. Practitioners may partner with international organisations in their work. Given the likelihood of a power differential in such cases, it is important to highlight the need for an equal relationship, negotiate roles and responsibilities ahead of time and co-develop the activities. Where African practitioners are more familiar with the local context and have expertise in addressing its challenges, as well as a longer presence on the ground, they should be the lead in the partnership, providing guidance on what is needed.

“There is a need to refresh people’s knowledge of transitional justice processes and increase their capacity to follow up on the recommendations of the TRRC and what will come after the commission. There will also be a need to deal with victims’ expectations going forward.”

Adama Jallow, Gambia Centre for Victims of Human Rights Violations

7. As with the needs assessment, a multidisciplinary practitioner team with a range of skills and experience is likely to be more effective than a single individual or a specialised team. The team should include specialists as well as generalists. It would also benefit from including members with networking and advocacy experience, as well as members with experience facilitating processes with stakeholders ranging from members of affected communities to policy makers. Practitioners with the necessary skills can take the lead on different activities.
8. One benefit of a diverse practitioner team is that members will informally train each other on the

job, particularly in areas of work outside the scope of their position, although members should be able to access formal training if needed to respond to local challenges.

9. In putting together a team and later deciding who will take the lead on an activity, practitioners need to reflect on their own positionality and demographic or identity markers, and consider who would be most likely to gain trust and buy-in from local stakeholders, given the specificities of each context.
10. In order to work in an adaptive, iterative way, the practitioner team will need a robust learning, monitoring and evaluation framework and process, which includes regular individual and group reflections, sharing knowledge within the team and with stakeholders, and room to change activities based on these learnings. A developmental and collaborative approach to monitoring and evaluation should be considered.
11. The team needs to be aware of their own mental health and the possibility of secondary trauma, as well as that of partners and stakeholders. It is essential to practice and teach self-care in order to be able to support others, especially vulnerable members of affected communities.
12. Practitioners should seek to build relationships with a network of donors who can provide urgent funds to match fast-moving transitional justice processes. In taking a contextual approach, practitioners should focus on working with flexible donors who respect their process, expertise and advice.

Considering Secondment

Local needs call for different degrees of support from practitioners. This applies to all practitioners, but especially those coming from other countries or regions. This section outlines some lessons with regard to practitioners being embedded in state institutions or a transitional justice mechanism, embedded in local civil society organisations, working from a field office or providing remote support. It is based on the assumption that secondment is an option, both by invitation from host countries and institutions, home

organisation capacity and available budgets, which it may not be in all contexts. Nonetheless, these lessons apply to a range of situations.

“What is the language for what happened in The Gambia? We need to assist people to narrate their own stories instead of imposing our own language and experiences. Positioning ourselves as experts can be useful, depending on the audience, but with most people we need to find out what questions they want to ask in assessing the problems they face.”

Thembisile Masondo, CSVR

Lessons learnt:

1. Embeddedness is a particularly good option if there is insufficient local capacity and expertise in transitional justice and/or MHPSS, or any field crucial to addressing local challenges.
2. Formalised embeddedness in the form of a secondment demonstrates a high level of commitment on the part of practitioners and their home organisation. It also offers immediate local recognition based on association, as well as access to a wide range of local stakeholders. This access assists with learning about the specificities of the context and developing more tailored activities.
3. Embeddedness ensures that practitioners can join programmes, projects and teams that are already in operation, rather than starting from scratch. It also ensures the sustainability of processes initiated during the secondment, as it enables institutional handover.
4. If the budget allows, secondment of a team with a range of skills is preferable to an individual secondment, as this ensures broader reach in-country, mutual support and learning within the team, and greater adaptivity to emerging issues.
5. In either case, but especially in the case of individual embeddedness, the home organisation must continue to provide its seconded staff with structure and support in order to maintain a link to broader strategies and activities, feed learnings into the home organisation, ensure clear guidance, and organise trainings or other capacity building support if needed. Otherwise, seconded staff may feel isolated and get caught up in the minutiae of the host organisation, to the detriment of the home organisation's aims.
6. To avoid confusion and delays, among other problems, embeddedness requires a clear mandate, terms of reference and distribution of roles and responsibilities, by agreement between the home and host institutions.
7. It is important to note that host institutions may require not only capacity building and content support, but also more fundamental technical support that deals with organisational development, strategic planning, the design and implementation of suitable procedures, protocols and tools, and input on staffing needs and hiring processes. They may require regular debriefings with staff, as well as mentoring and supervision. This is why the core mandate and activities of the secondment need to be negotiated and formalised beforehand, after a dedicated institutional needs assessment, although with an understanding of the need for flexibility in response to new developments.
8. Being embedded in a government department or a state-sponsored transitional justice mechanism gives practitioners and their home organisation recognition and influence. In contexts of widespread mistrust of state institutions, however, it might raise suspicions and interfere with contextualised, inclusive work. This choice needs to be given careful consideration.
9. If practitioners are embedded in a state (-sponsored) institution, it is best for them to be there from inception or as early as possible in order to ensure buy-in and influence.
10. Working with such an institution provides an opportunity to include recommendations for

institutional reform in relation not only to ongoing transitional justice issues and but also to MHPSS (e.g., the development of an MHPSS framework for the Ministry of Health).

practitioners ensure that the concepts and tools they have co-developed with local stakeholders are understood and implemented.

11. If they are seconded to a transitional justice mechanisms, especially a truth commission (like the Gambian TRRC), practitioners will be in a position to see a broad range of victims who are approaching the mechanism for other reasons and can now can be offered access to MHPSS services.
12. However, being embedded in a civil society organisation may be more suitable because this allows practitioners to maintain their independence and experiment with various approaches, while also applying for funding. State(-sponsored) institutions tend to be more formal and bureaucratic than civil society organisations, which may constrain rather than enable some forms of work.
13. If the budget allows, another option is setting up a field office for the home organisation. This is a good option if the work will be long term (and beyond the tenure of a transitional justice mechanism), if there is capacity and expertise on the ground and if practitioners have already established relationships locally. A field office provides practitioners with more independence, profiles their home organisation (rather than a host institution) and offers privacy for meetings, especially with victims of past abuses.
14. In line with the duration of the secondment, defined and achievable goals should be decided on from the beginning. Although these may change as contextual needs shift, it allows the focus of the work to be clear and prevents seconded staff from taking on work and responsibilities that do not contribute to long-term goals.
15. If an extended stay in any form is not possible, practitioners should still consider investing in at least a month or two of on-site accompaniment and capacity building, followed by long-term and regular remote support (online and telephonic). Investing in a substantial field visit helps

Building Sustainability

In promoting holistic transitional justice and contextualised MHPSS, sustainability is key. Practitioners' engagements require long-term investment in a context, which includes highlighting existing capacity and shoring it up with additional knowledge and skills to the point where resulting programmes and processes can continue whether they are directly involved or not.

“When you can't spend years building your own network, then you need to use the resources that are there, the people and the skills that are there, and then add your own skills and information to that. You build on the passion that is already there.”

Gugu Shabalala, CSV

Lessons learnt:

1. Practitioners should aim to ensure that a wide range of local stakeholders are pursuing transitional justice in the long term and building up ongoing MHPSS at the national, regional and grassroots levels. This includes stakeholders at multiple levels and positions, including elected officials, civil servants, civil society representatives, professionals, students, organised victims and members of affected communities, through both formal and informal frameworks and processes. These efforts require support from stakeholders at all levels, including champions in government, new and established civil society organisations, victims' groups and grassroots movements. They will also require institutional reform and policy development.
2. Practitioners should tap into or help build informal support networks set up by local civil society, to promote mutual learning and support, as well as the foundations for possible issue-based coalitions.

3. A group that will need particular support from a psychosocial perspective is affected individuals and communities, including victims who are back at home after participating in transitional justice mechanisms.
4. Part of practitioners' work is to prepare victims for an ongoing, long-term transitional justice process, including multiple mechanisms over time. Part of this is addressing victims' expectations and discussing what reparation, reconciliation and healing may mean for them and for others.
5. Any group or institution dealing with victims needs to hire or train people with different skills, including language skills, to be statement takers, documenters, social workers, human rights officers, psychologists and so forth. Mental health issues need to be seen as part of documenting abuses, assessing victims' needs and referring people to various services.
6. A key focus should be identifying people, practices and spaces that support healing at the community level and then enhancing these existing capacities by training community-based psychosocial supporters and investing in targeted community mobilisation. As indicated above, the local stakeholders who could lead or support such processes in the long term might be religious leaders, women leaders, schoolteachers and others who already play such a role in their areas.
7. Practitioners might invest in building the capacity of a committee of 20 individuals from different regions of the country over two to three years, through training, community-based workshop series, practice, reflection, remote support and other tailored activities.
8. They should identify individuals who have some formal or informal training in psychology, train them in a contextualised approach and then offer ongoing mentorship, whether through in-person meetings or online and telephonic check-ins.
9. Practitioners should advocate for and/or participate in strengthening psychology and social work programmes at tertiary education institutions, so that students can help provide support before and after graduating. There is a need for formally qualified personnel, in addition to people who have accessed other types of training and capacity building.
10. They should help build an extensive referral network that is capacitated to address the different needs of members of affected communities, ranging from psychosocial to livelihood and governance issues, among others.
11. The media, especially radio, is crucial for awareness raising and outreach regarding MHPSS, especially to work against misconceptions and encourage those who need support to access it.
12. Well-funded organisations might offer sub-grants to local organisations, supporting them in learning how to fundraise, engage with donors, do organisational development, and design and implement projects in a safe environment. In this case, it is important to clarify that these organisations are partners, not donors, and that meetings are for reflection and not reporting.

“Many people cannot begin to think about their personal healing if their family is not provided for, yet for many their inability to provide is a direct result of the trauma they experienced. If someone feels useless and helpless, they will believe that nothing is possible so there is no point in trying. For example, a disempowered individual often does not know how to create a business plan or see the long-term potential of this. MHPSS and livelihood practitioners need to work hand in hand in guiding and empowering people to build a sustainable future.”

Jacqui Chowles, CSV

CONCLUSION

This report has shared the reflections of African practitioners and their partners on efforts to integrate MHPSS into the transitional justice process in The Gambia. While these reflections have emerged from the Gambian experience to date, the lessons they suggest are relevant in many transitional contexts, in Africa and elsewhere in the global South.

The lessons learnt demonstrate the value of contextualising MHPSS alongside transitional justice. By collaborating with local stakeholders in an inclusive manner and building on existing practices that promote healing and resilience, practitioners can enhance local capacity, encourage innovative approaches and ensure buy-in, even with limited resources. In order to contextualise their work, practitioners first need to understand the context. By investing time and effort in both the design and implementation of a needs assessment, they can gain insight into historical, cultural and other specificities, start building relationships with stakeholders, and identify practices and institutions to engage with at the community and national levels. To ensure that the activities planned in response to the assessment remain relevant, practitioners should aim to invest a number of years in the context, continue to build relationships by remaining accessible to their

collaborators, and regularly learn from and adapt to changing realities and needs on the ground.

This tailored approach may call for practitioners to be embedded in host institutions within the local context—an approach that signals commitment while enabling access to stakeholders, their buy-in and the sustainability of new interventions, although it requires very clear terms of reference to succeed. The type of support practitioners provide, whether embedded, on-site, remote or other, should be shaped by local needs as they evolve. A contextualised approach helps ensure the sustainability of what practitioners have helped build. By working with a wide range of stakeholders—including of community-based change agents from various parts of the country—practitioners can contribute to establishing informal networks and the formal infrastructure needed to provide ongoing psychosocial support as part of multiple phases of a transitional justice process, particularly for victims of past abuses and other vulnerable groups.

As part of an African articulation of transitional justice, this integrated and contextualised approach to MHPSS is one key to creating the conditions for security and democratic and socioeconomic transformation.

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The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) is a non-governmental organisation which envisions societies that are peaceful, equal and free from violence. CSV aims to understand and prevent violence, heal its effects and build sustainable peace at the community, national and regional levels. We do this through collaboration with and learning from the lived and diverse experiences of communities affected by violence and conflict to inform innovative interventions, generate knowledge, shape public discourse, influence policy, hold states accountable and promote gender equality, social cohesion and active citizenship.

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