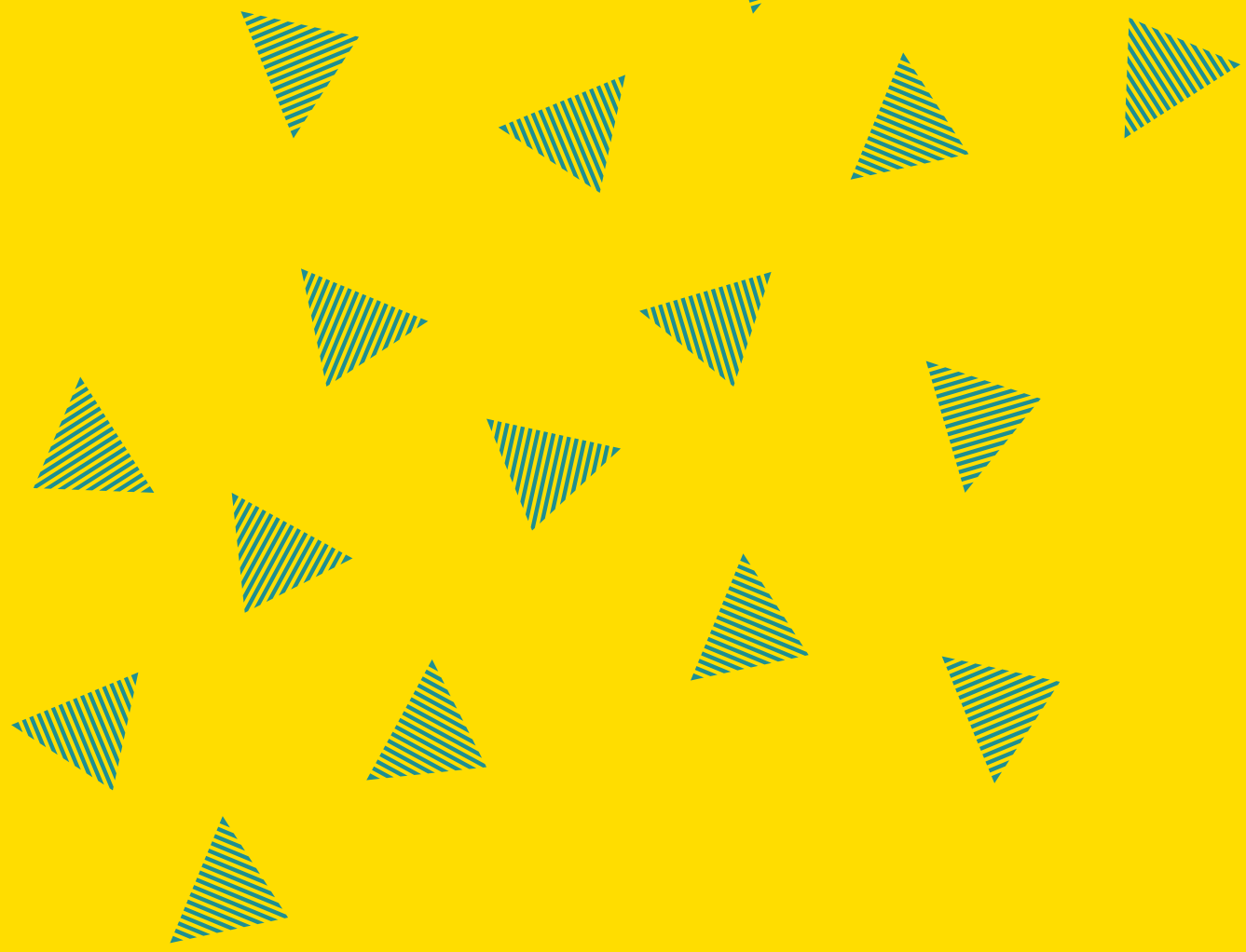


EXILE AND THE COLOMBIAN TRUTH COMMISSION

An unprecedented collaboration experience





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An unprecedented collaboration experience

This publication is the product of the work of the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) as the technical secretariat of the Colombian Truth Commission in Europe. The experience and the materials produced by both institutions have been essential to create this document, as well as the hubs, inter-hub groups, interviewees, victims and witnesses and other people and entities that have supported the Commission from Europe.

The publication has been produced by Ana Isabel Barrera, Maria Fanlo, Kristian Herbolzheimer and Silvia Plana, with research assistance from Claudia Alejandra Sepúlveda and editorial support for structure and content from The Social Vim Collective.

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and Non-Repetition

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INTRODUCTION



Representatives of the European hubs, the Commission and the technical secretariat at the II Meeting of Hubs in Sant Boi de Llobregat (Catalonia), November 2019.

The Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repitition (2018-2022) was created as the result of the peace agreement between the guerrilla of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Government of Colombia. Its mission was “to pursue the clarification of the patterns and explanatory causes of the internal armed conflict that satisfies the right of victims and society to the truth, promotes recognition of what happened, coexistence in the territories and contributes to laying the foundations for non-repetition, through a process of broad and plural participation for the construction of a stable and lasting peace”.¹

Compared with the numerous commissions previously created in other countries, one of the many innovations of this Commission was the commitment to also work with the exiled population, around one million people who had to leave the country due to the armed conflict. This **unprecedented mandate** within the context of transitional justice entailed coordinating an infrastructure to support the Commission abroad.

The International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) acted as the technical secretariat in Europe for the Commission, supporting its work with technical and financial resources, as well as with the three in-

¹ Truth Commission, ¿Qué es la Comisión de la Verdad?, [Website].

stances of participation abroad: the interviewers, the meeting and dialogue spaces —known as *hubs* or *nodes*— and the thematic working groups, known as *inter-hub groups*.

In line with the spirit of the peace agreement, the prominent role of victims was the critical cornerstone of all the work by the Commission and the ICIP. In this regard, the design and implementation of the Commission's mandate abroad resulted from intense work, not without certain obstacles, which involved listening to and collaborating with the victims, who became a core part of the peacebuilding process.

This publication has the following objectives:

1. To describe the activities, reflections and lessons learned by the people, organisations and institutions involved in this experience, mainly in Europe.
2. To acknowledge the importance of the work of all these people, organisations and institutions.
3. To contribute to the knowledge of the experiences, perspectives and expectations of the “Colombia outside of Colombia.”
4. To provide the international community with a tool for designing future processes for the participation of the exiled, refugee and migrant population in peace, memory and reconciliation processes.

The publication describes the coordination of citizen participation in the international work of the Commission at a global level. However, the information outlined, the analysis and the reflections are mainly based on the experience of the ICIP in Europe.

The methodology used to produce this document combined a meeting in Barcelona for analysis and

reflection, virtual focus groups with participants in the process in different European countries, personal interviews, and the compilation of documentation.

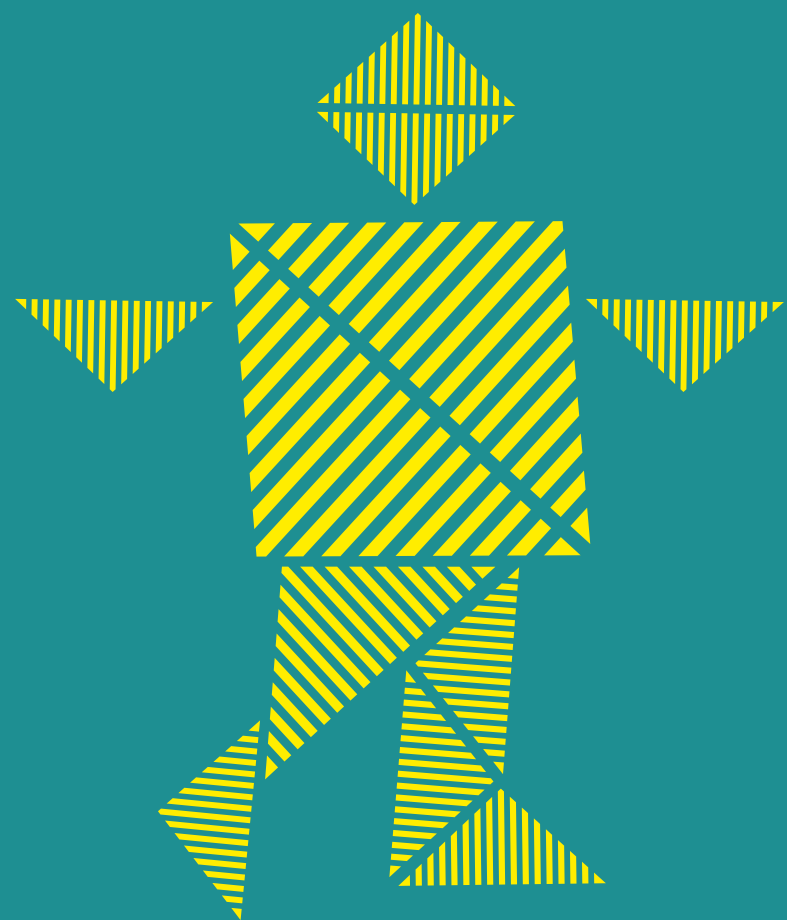
Peacebuilding is a complex and delicate process. It requires the participation and the commitment of society as a whole. The population that had to leave Colombia as a result of the conflict not only suffered acts of victimisation and the violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, which led to exile, but they also suffered difficulties adapting to a new context, stereotypes and asylum policies in different countries as well as the frustration of feeling invisible or misunderstood in their country of origin. **This document recognises their perseverance and exemplifies the power of social and political transformation from exile and the diaspora aimed at the common good.**



Detail of the dialogue event between victims and commissioner Carlos Martín Beristain. Barcelona, March 2020.



1. THE COLOMBIAN TRUTH COMMISSION



1.1. BACKGROUND: THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

On 26 September 2016, the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) signed a historic peace agreement that marked a breakthrough to ending one of the world's bloodiest and longest wars; however, armed conflict and violence persist. The figures are horrifying: 450,000 people killed, 120,000 people missing, 50,000 people kidnapped, one million people in exile, and more than eight million people internally displaced (Truth Commission, 2022).

Throughout history, most peace agreements have included partial or total amnesties, with the result that the crimes perpetrated have remained unpunished. Without outside pressure, armed actors usually appeal to the idea that the best option is to look forward and argue the need not to reopen old wounds. For example, this was the case in previous peace agreements in Colombia (in the '90s) and in the case of Northern Ireland (1998). However, the Government and FARC found themselves in a unique situation. On the one hand, in the years preceding

the agreement, international legislation established the non-applicability of statutory limitations to war crimes, genocides and crimes against humanity. In 2003, the International Criminal Court began operating to investigate and judge such crimes when the countries responsible do not take on the task, intending to recognise the victims' right to truth, justice and reparation and guarantees of non-repetition. Thus, complete amnesties are no longer possible in 21st-century peace agreements.

On the other hand, **Colombia has been characterised by having an extraordinarily organised and resilient civil society.** It is perhaps the country with the most documentation of human rights violations, despite the threats, aggressions, murders and disappearances of hundreds of human rights defenders. This work has been partly possible due to international solidarity and ongoing advocacy with human rights bodies and public institutions worldwide.

As a result of these developments, the Government and FARC were obliged to include victims' rights as one of the six points of the negotiating agenda. Indeed, it became the most challenging issue in negotiations. The main milestones in this process were as follows:

- Two years after beginning negotiations, in June 2014, the parties agreed on a declaration of principles that explicitly outlined their commitment to the victims' rights to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition.



IV Meeting of hubs in Barcelona, April 2022.



Presentation of the final report of the Truth Commission in Europe. Bilbao, 6 July 2022.

- Between August and December of that same year, five groups of twelve victims —selected by the United Nations to represent the wide range of victims— travelled to Havana and presented their cases and claims to the negotiating table. These were tough sessions where several victims were face to face with the people directly responsible for their situation. These visits significantly impacted the negotiating teams and, undoubtedly, influenced the negotiating table, maintaining the commitment to put victims at the centre of their deliberations and agreements.
- The partial agreement on victims was signed in Havana on 15 December 2015. It included the establishment —after the signing of the final peace deal— of a Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition comprised of three public and independent entities: the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition; the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons, and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace.

The agreement on victims was inspired by the South African transition from the apartheid regime to democ-

racy, a process that placed a strong emphasis on recognising the responsible parties as part of the truth. However, unlike South Africa, where the Commission had an Amnesty Committee which was able to grant individual pardons in exchange for the complete truth, in Colombia, a judicial body is responsible for investigating the most atrocious crimes and judging the accountable people and if applicable, enforcing sentences with a robust restorative component. If the people responsible cooperate with the justice system, they can benefit from reduced sentences and serve sentences by working to help victims and thus repair the damage caused to society instead of going to prison. If they do not cooperate, they can be sentenced to a maximum of twenty years in prison. This Special Jurisdiction for Peace must involve the participation of everyone directly or indirectly involved in the armed conflict, including state agents.

There is no peace without human rights and no respect for human rights without peace. The Colombian peace agreement is the world's most sophisticated effort to date to prevent impunity and simultaneously progress towards coexistence and national reconciliation.

1.2. OBJECTIVES, APPROACHES, TERRITORIES AND METHODS

The Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition (henceforth, the Commission) began its mandate on 28 November 2018. It ended in August 2022² after presenting and publishing the main results outlined in the Truth Commission's final report. Its objectives focused on the following points:

- clarifying the truth of what happened to explain a highly complex conflict;
- promoting the recognition of the dignity of victims, of individual and collective responsibilities and of the seriousness of what happened as a society, and;
- encouraging coexistence in territories and laying the foundations for non-repetition.

The Commission emphasized **truth** as a collective right and a public good. Its recipients are not individuals, as in punitive regulations, since truth, in this case, has a collective vocation. In this regard, the **clarification** was aimed at explaining the main and most severe patterns of violence within the war's framework. To this end, the Commission listened to victims, witnesses and people responsible for human rights violations during the armed conflict.

The **objective of recognition** was structured around three focuses:

- Recognition of victims as political subjects with a transformative capacity whose basic rights were violated by war.
- Recognition of responsible parties, individual or collective, who, by their action, omission, complicity or negligence, caused damage to the dignity of people, denied them their basic rights or used violence within the framework of the internal armed conflict against the civilian population. They can be armed actors, State agents or civilians.
- Recognition in society of the seriousness of the armed conflict, the responsibility for it and its consequences, and the need to commit to peacebuilding.

With the **objective of coexistence and non-repetition**, the Commission referred to the need to contribute to coexistence in territories, viewing the clarification of truth as an opportunity to recover trust, to learn to have a dialogue between opposing parties and to interact peacefully, and also to identify and promote the conditions needed for non-repetition.

² The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the implementation of the Commission's mandate. This situation made it possible to extend the working period by seven months beyond the three years that were initially planned (through Ruling C/337/21 of the Constitutional Court of Colombia).



Fabric print for the presentation of the final report, made in the UK in September 2022.

Also, from its creation, the roadmap of the Commission defined a series of differential approaches that had to guide its work: ethnicity, gender, psychosocial support, children, young people, elderly people, and disabled people. Through these, the Commission recognised that “there are sectors in more vulnerable conditions, who have suffered the impact of the war more deeply; therefore, they receive special treatment both in terms of the methodology and in listening to and analysing the impacts they have suffered”.³ Another essential element for the work was the cultural and artistic strategy, acknowledging that, faced with the impacts and wounds of the conflict, “communities, in their pursuit of truth and healing, have found in art and symbolic expression a place of denunciation, refuge and dignity”.⁴

On the other hand, the Commission decided to have a presence in the territories, approach the victims and acquire a local and regional understanding of the dynamics of the armed conflict and the effects suffered. The **territorial approach** considered activating peacebuilding processes by creating shared spaces in different areas of the country. This approach sought to achieve interventions in line with the social, political and economic reality of each of the territories and

encourage spaces for conversation and participation that were managed autonomously in line with the work of the Commission. It was carried out through the territorial rollout in eleven regions: ten within Colombia and one related to the Colombians who had to leave the country for reasons related to the conflict.

In each of these regions, except for the International Macro-territory, where other methodologies were needed, the Commission created offices known as Houses of Truth. Several activities were carried out, testimonies were collected, and mobile teams were deployed from them and settled in the territories listening to people.

Alongside the territorial rollout, the Commission applied three methods for clarifying and collecting the voices of the exiled population: the report, the case, and the testimony. To collect information, the Commission trained interviewers, as well as experts in different areas, who helped to give a vision that was holistic and committed to the process. The Commission listened to everyone who wanted to clarify the truth or acknowledge their responsibilities, provided that they complied with the established forms and procedures, in this case paying attention to their value for dialogue and clarification (under no circumstances with a legal character).

The work of **the Commission sought to create a shared legacy** of reflections, narratives, actions, products and processes, both tangible and intangible, which were reflected in its final report on the transmedia platform and in the many activities and processes that took place in Colombia and outside of Colombia. This report provides the State, the Comprehensive System of Truth, the international community, allies and society with findings and recommendations for the non-repetition of the armed conflict.

³ Truth Commission. *Enfoques diferenciales*. [Website].

⁴ Truth Commission. *Estrategia cultural y artística*. [Website].

2. THE COLOMBIAN EXILE



Exile refers to the forced departure and separation of those who have had to leave the country due to armed conflict. The term exile is used in the Commission to identify the political reasons and link between the armed conflict events and the search for international protection that has characterised the immense majority of the victims (Truth Commission, “The Colombia outside of Colombia” volume). In turn, the Commission recognises that exile violates human rights: “Having to cross borders to save your life cannot be compared to internal forced displacement; many people who went into exile had already experienced one or several displacements beforehand. And although leaving helped to save lives, at the same time it caused enormous damage to individuals and families. Due to the dimensions and continuation over time, it entails a deep social and collective impact”.⁵

Exile encompasses all victims, both those who have proceedings open with the Colombian judiciary and those who have not taken legal measures or actions or have had different statuses and proceedings in the receiving countries. Therefore, this exile covers categories or realities such as forced migration, refuge or political asylum. On the other hand, not all victims identify as such, and some prefer a more anonymous profile hidden under the status of economic or social migrants. At the same time, Colombians residing abroad are not victims but have contributed to the work of the Truth Commission. Therefore, the ICIP also works with the concept of diaspora, which includes everyone of Colombian origin living abroad.

In contrast to the magnitude of the internal displacement,⁶ Colombian exile has remained invisible in Colombia. In fact, up until the publication of the final report by the Commission, there were no pre-

cise statistics about how many victims of the Colombian armed conflict lived outside the country. **The report by the Commission quantifies exile to cover more than one million people.**

There are several reasons for the lack of accurate data. On the one hand, as mentioned, many victims of violence chose not to request international protection measures; therefore, they were considered part of economic or labour migration flows. In other cases, the registry systems of countries were different or did not consider them as war refugees. On the other hand, the lack of figures is also related to an irregular administrative situation (Bermúdez Torres, 2021).

Although forced migration began in the 50s and has occurred continuously until the present, the Commission identifies the following periods of greatest intensity of exile:

⁵ Beristain, Carlos Martín (dir.). *The Colombia outside of Colombia: The truths of exile*. Truth Commission, 2022.

⁶ With 6.8 million, in 2021 Colombia ranked second among countries with the highest number of internally displaced people worldwide, behind Syria (UNHCR, 2022).

1978-1991

The context of the persecution of members and leaders of social movements such as trade unions, students and peasantry; persecution of members and leaders of opposition movements; and worsening of violence in drug trafficking cartels.

1980

1990

1992-2005

Exacerbation of the armed conflict (spread of kidnapping and increased massacres, targeted killings and impunity).

2000

2006-2016

The period of demobilization of paramilitary groups, period of activity of post-paramilitary groups and actions by guerrillas up until the signing of the peace agreement between the national government and FARC-EP.

2010

2017-2022

Implementation period of the peace agreement. Reduction in violence but continuation of massacres, killings, disappearances and threats due to the acts of other guerrilla groups and criminal organisations. The killing of leaders and former members of FARC-EP stands out, along with the worsening situation in some areas of the country.

2020



The first training of interviewers in Europe. Bilbao, October 2019.

2.1. THE COLOMBIAN DIASPORA AND EXILE IN EUROPE

The main destinations for Colombian refugees have varied according to factors such as the ease of entry into a country, asylum policies and the existence of family networks, among others. In practice, as mentioned, restrictions or limitations on accessing international protection measures result in the invisibility of exile, given that people in exile become part of the figures of the migrant population. For this reason, the perspective of Colombian asylum in Europe goes hand-in-hand with migration. Bermúdez (2021) suggests the following stages:

THE DECADE OF THE 90s

Progressive tightening of migratory policies in Europe and implementation of restrictive measures for access to the right of asylum by most countries, coinciding with the increase and worsening of violence in Colombia. During this time, countries in southern Europe, mainly Spain and Italy, became priority destinations for the pursuit of safety, protection, work and economic opportunities.

2008-2016

The economic crisis of 2008, which resulted in austerity measures, an increase in unemployment and a deterioration of working conditions, encouraged a process of returns to Colombia and the reduction of new inflows, mainly to Spain and Italy. In the case of armed conflict victims, these processes did not take place with guarantees of protection or safety and were viewed as a mere migratory phenomenon.

AFTER THE SIGNING OF THE AGREEMENT

from 2016 on, there was an exponential increase in the Colombian diaspora, especially in Spain, the United Kingdom, Germany and France. During this time, there was also an increase in asylum applications from Colombians in Europe: they quadrupled between 2016 and 2017 and more than tripled between 2018 and 2019. These figures dropped in 2020, mainly because of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19.

However, this increase in asylum requests did not imply an increase in positive outcomes; instead, the historical trend of rejecting these applications in Europe was maintained. To illustrate this, as a relevant piece of data, according to figures from Eurostat, between 2008 and 2020, more than 95% of asylum requests from Colombians were rejected in the first instance, and 91% were definitively rejected.

DECADES OF THE 1970s AND 1980s

Nordic countries, particularly Sweden and Norway, alongside the United Kingdom, were among the first destination countries for Colombian refugees as an alternative to the traditional flows towards the United States. To a lesser extent, France, Belgium, and Switzerland were also recipient countries of the Colombian population, both migrants and refugees.

BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Significant increase in the Colombian refugee population, as well as growth and diversification of migration in a broader sense. At the beginning of the 2000s and up until 2008, France, Germany and the United Kingdom were among the European countries that took in the most significant number of Colombian refugees. Spain became the first recipient country for the Colombian population in Europe, even though only a few asylum applications had positive outcomes.

As a result, **when the Truth Commission began its mandate in 2018, there were more than half a million people who were born in Colombia residing in Europe.** Although many of them were not direct victims of violence, these figures show how often the Colombian population had to seek a new life outside of their country within a context of violence and armed conflict for more than fifty years.

al and organisational level, with social and political participation, concerning the situation in Colombia and, in particular, peacebuilding in the country. This active role has resulted in the involvement of exiles and the diaspora during the negotiation process with FARC-EP and the implementation of the peace agreement, often in collaboration with European civil society and with the support and participation of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition.

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION	POPULATION BORN IN COLOMBIA*
Spain	386,141
Italy	40,023
United Kingdom	38,000
France	30,921
Netherlands	15,127
Switzerland	13,671
Sweden	12,315
Germany	9,000
Belgium	6,733
Norway	6,000



“The greatest contribution to the victims has been the recognition, providing visibility for victims in exile and making people in Colombia realise that there is a Colombia outside of it, giving it a place.”

Interviewer from the Basque Country

* Population born in Colombia residing in Europe. Data from Eurostat (2018), except for the United Kingdom (estimations from the Office for National Statistics, 2018), France (OECD.Stat 2015) and Germany (OECD.Stat 2015).

The wide variety of profiles of people who fled from different actors who perpetrated violence forms a diverse group of exiles and diaspora, which was an essential element for the implementation of the Commission’s work outside of Colombia: judges, members of left-wing political groups, relatives of kidnapped persons, trade unionists, human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, afro-descendants and peasants, business people, former members of guerrilla groups, police officers, soldiers and paramilitary members, as well as people not in organisations or without party links. For years, this wide range of profiles has contributed to the development of initiatives, both on an individu-

3. THE INTERNATIONAL WORK OF THE COMMISSION

The international work of the Commission was coordinated from Bogota with a small team responsible for implementing the work in the so-called **International Macro-territory**. Led by Commissioner Carlos Martín Beristain, this team worked to facilitate the participation of exiles in the work of the Commission, as well as seek international support, both in terms of economic resources and to ensure the essential institutional support to work on an extremely sensitive matter, under unfavourable political conditions in Colombia and with a lack of visibility of the Colombia that had been forced to leave the country due to the armed conflict. In the absence of similar past cases elsewhere in the world, the Commission had to innovate to put into practice the mandate of listening and promoting the participation of what it considered the “Colombia outside of Colombia”.

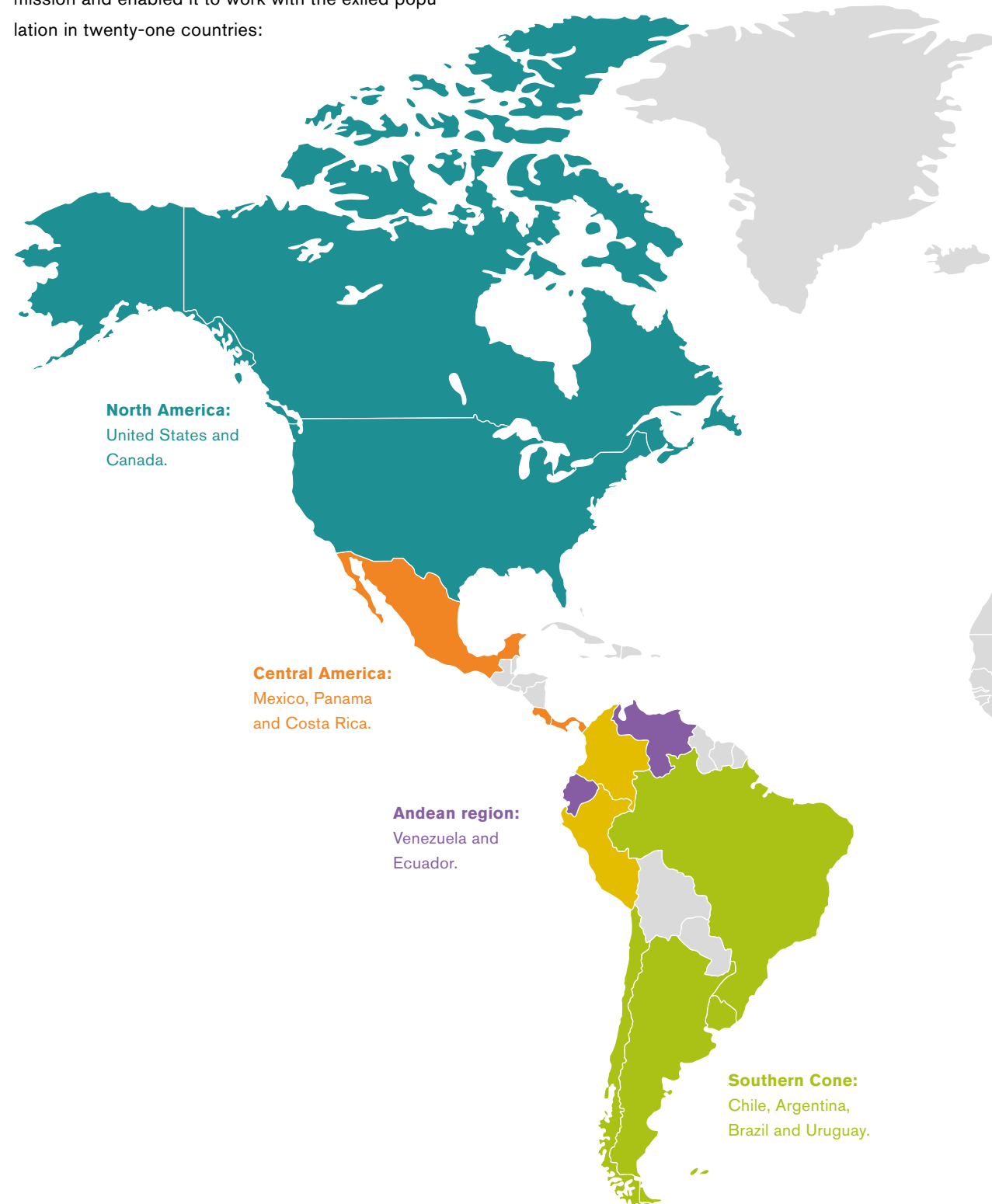
To do this work, the Commissioner had the support of a team formed by a coordinator, an assistant, five people from the research team and a communication liaison officer. Also, there was a team responsible for transcribing interviews.

In its structure outside of Colombia, the **International Macro-territory** had a person to create the initial link in countries where the support process would be carried out. Subsequently, five international links of the Commission were established: in the Basque Country (link on a European level), United Kingdom, Argentina (link in the Southern Cone), Mexico and Ecuador. It involved people and organisations contracted by the Commission, with management capacity, knowledge of local and regional contexts, and experience working on migrations, international protection, and peacebuilding. Alongside this, from Catalonia, the ICIP served as the technical secretariat for the Commission in Europe.

The key criterion for the implementation of work was to encourage a **participatory process in which any person or organisation that wished to could contribute to the mandate of the Commission**. Thus, besides adding support, the Commission aimed to institutionally recognise the tireless efforts of hundreds of initiatives that have been working for years for peace and human rights in Colombia from abroad.

This coordination was one of the critical methodological decisions for putting victims at the centre and ensuring the active participation of different actors: victims of other armed actors who were not organised, organisations of Colombian victims, peace and human rights activists, organisations in host countries and people from the worlds of arts and academia, among others.

Hence, a support structure was created, both social and institutional, Colombian and international, which significantly contributed to the mandate of the Commission and enabled it to work with the exiled population in twenty-one countries:



North America:
United States and
Canada.

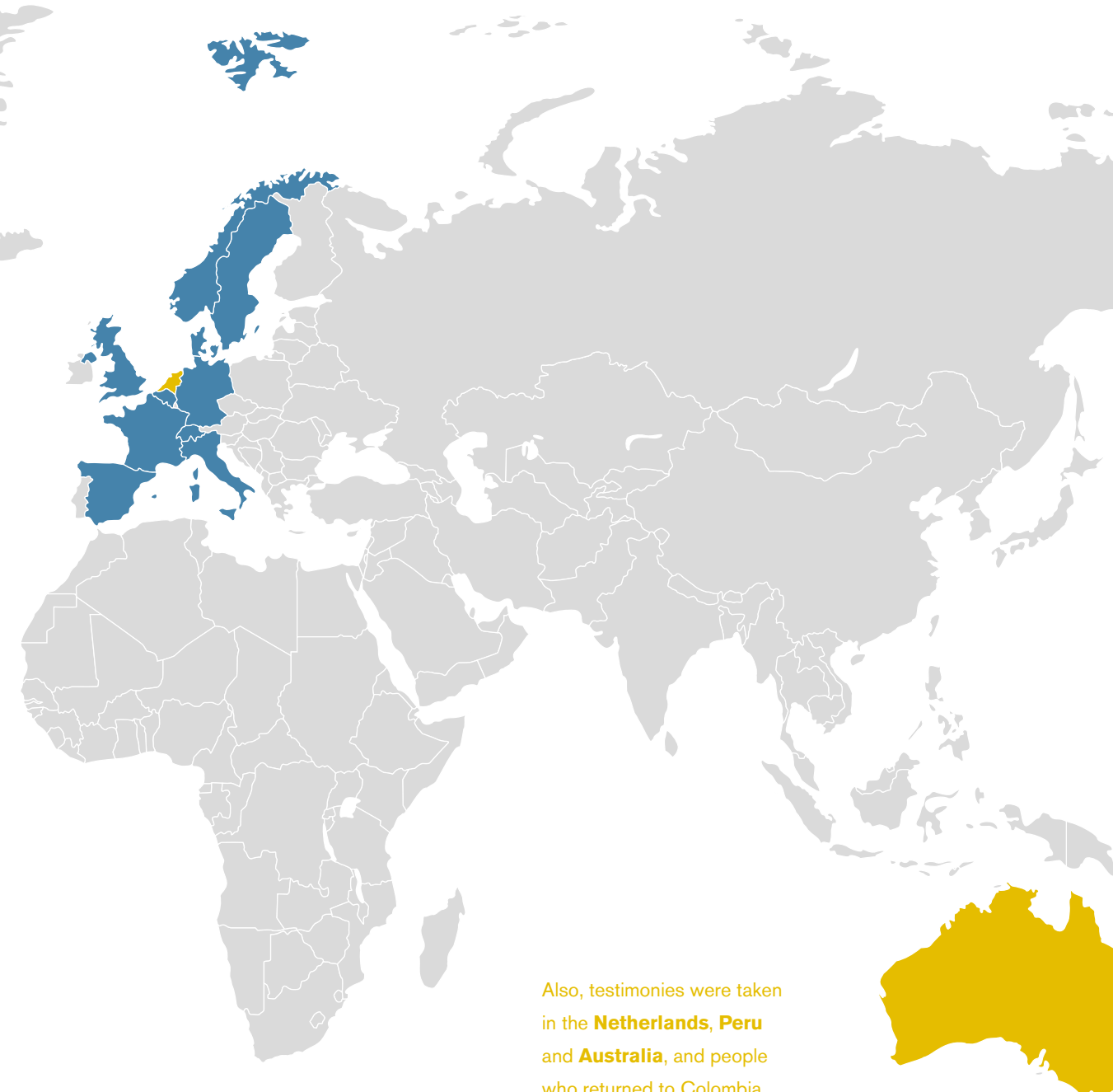
Central America:
Mexico, Panama
and Costa Rica.

Andean region:
Venezuela and
Ecuador.

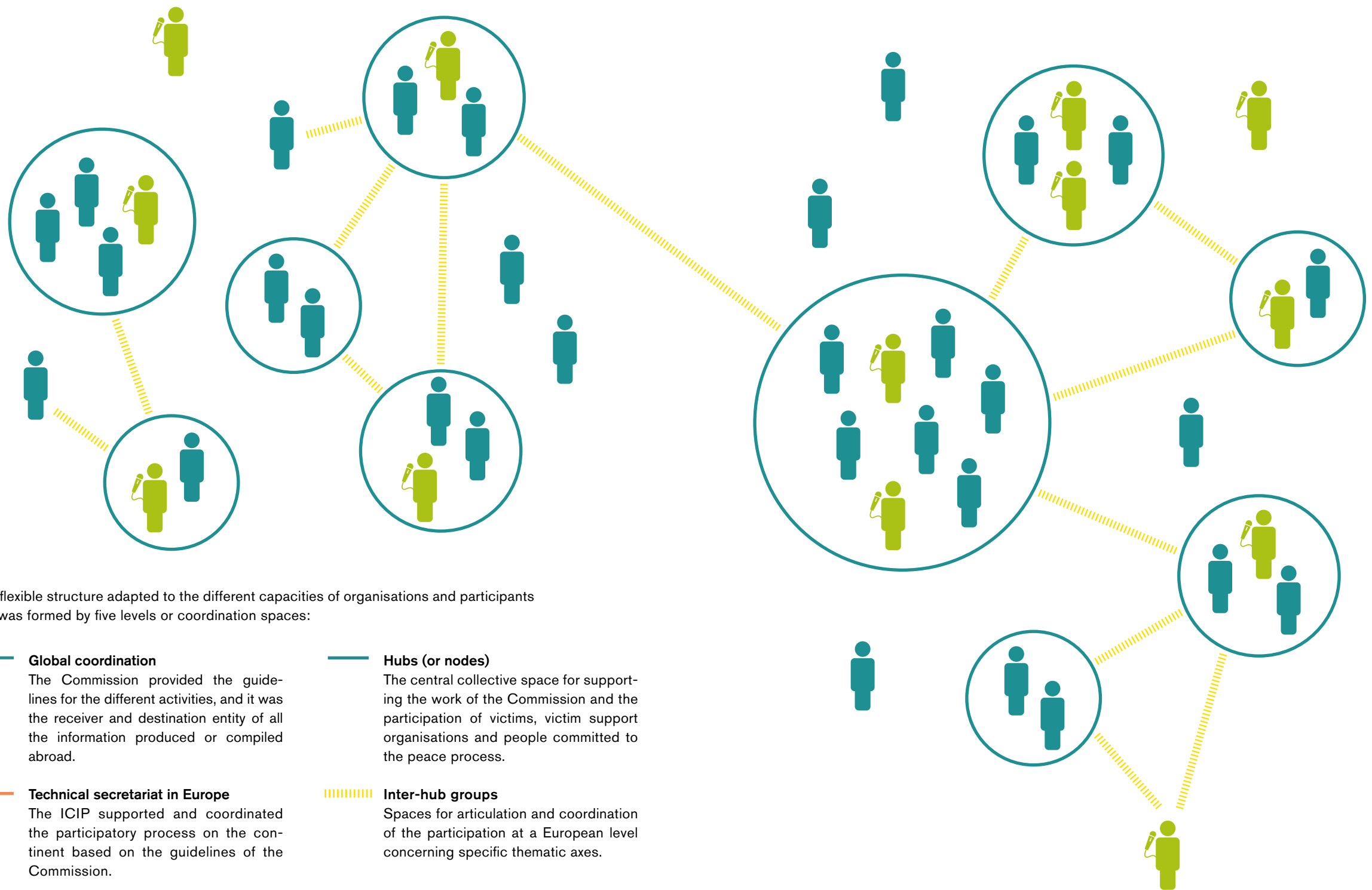
Southern Cone:
Chile, Argentina,
Brazil and Uruguay.

Europa:

Spain, France, Italy,
Switzerland, Germany,
Belgium, United Kingdom,
Denmark, Sweden, Norway.



Also, testimonies were taken
in the **Netherlands, Peru**
and **Australia**, and people
who returned to Colombia.



This flexible structure adapted to the different capacities of organisations and participants and was formed by five levels or coordination spaces:

- — — **Global coordination**
 The Commission provided the guidelines for the different activities, and it was the receiver and destination entity of all the information produced or compiled abroad.
- **Hubs (or nodes)**
 The central collective space for supporting the work of the Commission and the participation of victims, victim support organisations and people committed to the peace process.
- **Technical secretariat in Europe**
 The ICIP supported and coordinated the participatory process on the continent based on the guidelines of the Commission.
- ||||| **Inter-hub groups**
 Spaces for articulation and coordination of the participation at a European level concerning specific thematic axes.
- **Interviewers**
 People responsible for carrying out the exercise of listening in order to document cases and take testimonies from victims in exile.

3.1. ACTORS AND CATALYSTS OF THE PROCESS ABROAD

The diaspora and exile, organised and non-organised

The Colombian diaspora is very active in most countries where it resides, both on a social, cultural, and political level. Concerning the latter, a large number of initiatives have spent decades raising awareness about the situation in Colombia, with an emphasis on denouncing violations of human rights and the impacts of exile, both for the person who left Colombia and the family unit that remained in the country, known as “*insile*”.



Swiss hub meeting in Bern, June 2020.

The start of peace negotiations in 2012 encouraged a wave of hope and excitement manifested in the call for the voice of exiles and migrants to be heard at the negotiating table. As a result of this advocacy work, the peace agreement opened the door to the participation of exiled people in different mechanisms for its implementation. This associative network became the basis for the international work of the Commission.

Local organisations

In the different countries where the Commission has had a presence, the support of local organisations—more than 150 in Europe—has been essential. They have offered human and logistical resources and, sometimes, funding to carry out promotion and awareness-raising actions, collecting testimonies and producing reports.

As will be outlined in greater detail later, in some countries (Spain, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and Germany), local organisations placed the role of supporters of the process and «management» entities of resources obtained from their respective governments. Most of these management organisations had hired Colombian staff, making building trust easier.



“Work opportunities were created for people from the Colombian diaspora and with local organisations and exiles organisations.”

Representative from a resources management entity

Academia

In some countries, students and teachers expressed interest in supporting the work of the Commission. The presence of thematic teaching experts with independent stances on the subject of exile—affiliated with public and private institutions—, as well as the interest from students to learn about the Colombian process and make their voices visible, has broadened the framework of the action of the Commission to fulfil its objectives.

In Europe, just to give a few examples, Roma Tre University (Italy) organised the Europaz Network to create synergies to contribute to peacebuilding in Colombia and, notably, to support the Commission. From Catalonia, the *Círculo de la Palabra*⁷ was created as a space for academic debate for students and teachers of Colombian origin in different European countries through the presentation and publication of academic documents that revolve around peacebuilding and human rights regarding non-repetition. Moreover, the Commission entrusted the Universidad Javeriana of Colombia with the task of systematising the experience of the Commission in Ecuador.

Embassies and consulates of Colombia

The decree creating the Commission stipulated that all entities of the Colombian State should contribute to the fulfilment of its objectives and mandate. As a result of this provision, the Commission requested support from the diplomatic and consular corps to facilitate the participation of victims. The level of collaboration of embassies and consulates with the Commission mainly depended on the sensitivity and

commitment of the civil servants who ran these institutions. **In some cities, they contributed with educational and awareness-raising activities, the collection of testimonies and spaces for the recognition of victims.**



“It is necessary to remember that many people with refugee status in host countries cannot go to consulates for legal reasons, or that in many other cases they feel scared or distrustful.”

Truth Commission

However, the relationship between embassies and consulates with people in exile was more complicated in most places. In this regard, the Commission, in the volume “The Colombia outside of Colombia”, mentions: “Difficulties accessing the services of the consulate, along with the lack of knowledge relating to their rights as victims of the armed conflict abroad and the great mistrust that prevails concerning institutions of the Colombian State, mean that the action of many consulates is not viewed positively by a large number of people in exile.” And it adds that “it is necessary to bear in mind that many people with refugee status in host countries cannot go to consulates for legal reasons, or that in many other cases, they feel scared or distrustful”.

⁷ *Círculo de la palabra*. [El círculo de la palabra](#). International Catalan Institute for Peace, 2021. Documents 18/2021.

Círculo de la Palabra. [La verdad: el valor del saber: Experiencias de construcción conjunta de conocimiento de la diáspora colombiana en el marco del 1er Encuentro de estudiantes colombianas y colombianos en Europa](#). International Catalan Institute for Peace, 2022. Documents 19/2022.

3.2. THE TECHNICAL SECRETARIAT IN EUROPE

Although most of the victims went into exile in Colombia's neighbouring countries, the international work to support the Commission had a unique articulation in Europe. This is due to both the existence of victims' organisations and European organisations and institutions with a prior background supporting peace and human rights in Colombia.

In particular, the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) made a significant institutional commitment to strengthen the international work of the Commission. The ICIP has more than a decade of experience in peacebuilding in Colombia. Before the creation of the Commission, the ICIP already had experience in supporting organisations of Colombian women in the diaspora working on raising awareness, psychosocial healing, and even taking testimonies.

In May 2019, the ICIP and the Truth Commission signed a collaboration agreement through which the ICIP would act as the technical secretariat of the Commission in Europe. For this purpose, the ICIP had a team of two people working full time, with the partial support of a technical third party (2020-2021), the institution's management and communications team.

The International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) is a public and independent institution created by the Catalan Parliament in 2007 to promote the culture of peace in Catalan society and internationally and make Catalonia have an active role as an agent of peace in the world. The entity's Memory, coexistence and reconciliation area focuses on providing visibil-

ity and support in political transition processes to civil society initiatives, highlighting diasporas' role in peace and memory processes, especially women and victims.

As the technical secretariat in Europe, following the guidelines of the Commission, the ICIP took on a facilitator role considering the centrality of victims and the importance of their participation as an act of recognition for their work, which in turn had a healing character and helped to close the wounds of the conflict. This process was carried out by creating sixteen hubs or participation spaces around the work of the Commission in ten countries on the continent.

Specifically, in its role as technical secretariat in Europe, the ICIP had the following duties and carried out the following actions:

Supporting, advising, dynamising and coordinating the interviewers, the hubs and the working groups in Europe:

- Visits and support in eight countries to contribute to the creation and promotion of the hubs.
- Individual support for the interviewers, including the follow-up of specific cases, support on technical aspects, link with the team of the Commission and economic recognition for taking testimonies.
- Convening, facilitating and reporting coordination meetings of the hubs, working groups and the Commission.



Commissioner Carlos Martín Beristain chaired the first European meeting at ICIP headquarters. Barcelona, November 2018.

- Support and coordination of the hub in Catalonia and pedagogical actions, taking public testimonies and local acts to recognise the Colombian exile and diaspora.
- An initial meeting of experts and European organisations (November 2018 in Barcelona), led by commissioner Carlos Martín Beristain, to present the work proposal of the Commission, mapping victims' organisations, cases and existing sources of information and defining a working strategy with the Commission including the participation of allies and victims abroad.

Acting as a link between the initiatives in Europe and the Commission:

- Creation of methodological documents with instructions and guidance for participation following the Commission's guidelines, characteristics and work plans.
- Proposal of initiatives focused on recognising and restoring the dignity of victims residing in Europe, for example, through institutional recognitions in the host societies, especially in Catalonia.
- Production of communication and information materials, including a documentary on the experience in Europe, publications, videos and podcast, case reports and context for the Commission and an electronic newsletter on the activity of the hubs, among others. All materials are available at <https://www.icip.cat/es/cevcolumbia/>.
- Training interviewers to gather testimonies (February 2019 in Barcelona).
- Meetings of hubs and participation spaces (November 2019 in Barcelona, virtually in April 2021 and in person in Barcelona in April 2022) to strengthen the work of the hubs and reinforce coordination around the collection of testimonies.
- Meetings of the inter-hub group on gender (February 2020 in Berlin and October 2021 in Stockholm) to strengthen the group and to listen, care and reflect on the gender-based perspective in exile.
- Meeting of the inter-hub working group on recognition of victims (February 2020 in Barcelona) to structure an action plan for the recognition of exile within the framework of the Commission's comprehensive strategy on social dialogue.

Informing the Commission about participation processes in Europe and making proposals to strengthen them:

- Organisation of regular meetings with the Commission to report on the status of the process in Europe.
- Preparation of a diagnosis of hubs, working groups and the collection of testimonies by the interviewers.
- Support the Commission's act of recognition for exile "7th Meeting for Truth: the return of our voices" (Bogota and virtually, 13 November 2020).
- Presentation of the final report of the Commission "There is future if there is truth" in the Parliament of Catalonia (12 July 2022 in Barcelona), with the representation of exiled victims of the Colombian conflict and social organisations committed to peace in Colombia, with more than 250 people in attendance.

Supporting the Commission with the logistical and methodological organisation of activities and events of the Commission in Europe:

The intangible part of the role of the technical secretariat was the permanent contact with all individuals and organisations. In addition to logistical aspects, this contact made it possible to build trust, and it often also served as a space for emotional or psychosocial support under challenging situations. The ICIP also tried to mediate at times when tensions arose in one of the hubs.

In turn, by signing the collaboration agreement, the Commission committed, among others, to offer training to interviewers for gathering testimonies and psychosocial support, to provide teaching and promotional material that might be necessary for Europe and to lead the search for additional economic resources to those provided by the ICIP.



“We value the work of ICIP for keeping this process alive, knowing that it was very challenging.”

Participant of the educational and gender group in Belgium

ACHIEVEMENTS AND RESULTS OF THE TECHNICAL SECRETARIAT IN EUROPE

The technical secretariat contributed to the conceptualisation, both organisational and methodological, of the process of the hubs and inter-hub groups and the coordination between the interviewers in Europe and the Commission. These are some of the notable elements of the process:

The creation of specific guidelines for implementing the strategies of the Commission following the reality and the context of the different hubs and working groups. The technical secretariat was essential to inform the Commission about the process's needs and contribute to providing appropriate responses.

It took time to build trust between the people linked to the process, both interviewers and witnesses as members of hubs and support organisations, as well as with the Commission. Contact and personalised support, case by case and person by person, was essential for success in this field. This strategy requires a large investment of time, but it allows building robust processes based on mutual trust possible.

Clarification of the role and duties of each member of the international structure —particularly between the technical secretariat and the Commission—through a pedagogical and communication process. It was essential to establish basic criteria for the representation of the Commission, the use of logos and materials created during the process, among other elements, based on the premise that no participant in the process could act on behalf of the Commission.

Encouraging communication within the process was a constant challenge, mainly to avoid the duplication of communication channels and the loss of information. An extensive international structure such as the one created, with different spaces for participation and several levels of connection by many people, requires significant foresight and effort in internal communication.

3.3. INTERVIEWERS

In order to carry out the exercise of listening, documenting cases and gathering the testimonies of victims in exile, the Commission decided to train a group of interviewers. **Two hundred people were trained around the world, ninety in Europe**, mainly Colombians. People from different sectors with different sensitivities, experiences and working networks were encouraged to participate. Some were victims, while others were members of support organisations or universities.



“A process like this is neither uniform nor ideal and, for example, some people begin talking and do not finish, others do not even begin, and others regret it.”

Member of the technical secretariat

The Commission defined a set of selection criteria to participate in the process:

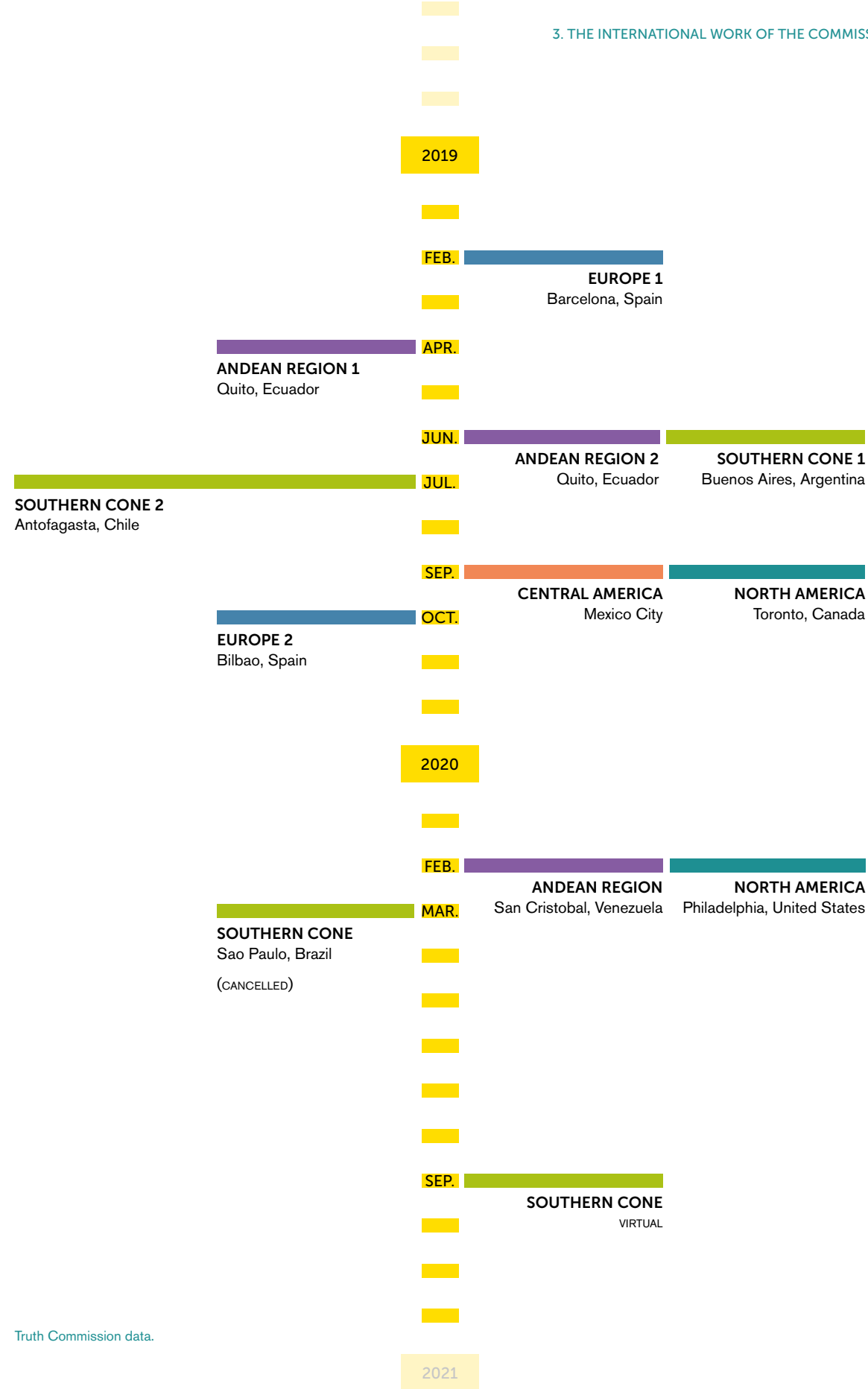
- Have experience working with victims, documenting cases and working in Colombia.
- Be willing to undergo a training and review process on the first cases, to use the formats and tools of the Commission and to meet a basic standard for documentation, safety, information handling and working guidelines.
- Have access to victims of the Colombian armed conflict, knowledge of them, and promote trust with them, whether from organisations or groups or different non-organised sectors.



Italian hub meeting in Rome, July 2019.

The people selected signed a confidentiality protocol on the handling of information. In turn, the interviewers were not allowed to speak on behalf of the Commission. The task of documenting cases had to be carried out based on the Commission's criteria and not on the criteria of other institutions, organisations or political sectors to which each interviewer may be associated.

The following illustration provides a summary of the training workshops that were conducted:



The interviewing process can be divided into three phases:

1. CONTACT WITH THE VICTIM: it was generally carried out through pre-existing relationships or nearby organisations. In many cases, it was necessary to have prior work on information and building trust. This process could require several meetings until the victim was willing to give their testimony.

2. TAKING THE TESTIMONY: the interviewer had a difficult challenge as they had to comply with the formal procedures required by the Commission for the interview (consent forms, fact sheets on the victimising actions...) and, at the same time, encourage a listening process with a particular focus on the psychosocial well-being of the person interviewed. The average time for each interview ranged from two to three hours. Two moments were identified: what happened in Colombia before and after leaving, upon arrival in the host country. Also, it was necessary to consider a time for opening and closing the interview.

3. ORGANISATION OF INFORMATION: after taking the testimony, the interviewer had to upload the data to a virtual platform that made it possible to send it to the Mission Information System of the Commission, with secure custody, where a large team of people worked on transcribing the testimonies recorded at the headquarters of the Commission in Bogota. This point was combined with the emotional follow-up of the witnesses.

The Commission provided recorders in each country, and although the work was voluntary, it was offered monetary compensation for the people appointed as interviewers. In the European case, the ICIP and management organisations agreed on an amount that made it possible to cover the travel and food expenses of the interviewers and the interviewees. In some cases, it was also possible to provide payment

for the hours invested in identifying and establishing contact and building trust with victims, conducting the interview and sending the information to the system of the Commission. Due to the unequal availability of resources in different countries, creating a single recognition fee for each interview was impossible.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the course of the truth-telling process: due to the mandatory lockdown in most countries and the restrictions on direct contact, interviews were conducted virtually; this thus broke down direct personal contact, which also made it difficult to manage emotions. Some interviewers decided to postpone taking testimonies until after the pandemic. Others, however, were quick to adapt to the virtual world. The online world has the advantage of facilitating contact without the need for travel, which simplified taking testimonies from people who were geographically far away from the interviewers. The established procedures, times and reorganisation of work made it possible to attain considerable achievements despite restrictions, thus displaying the capacity of the Commission, victims and teams of interviewers to adapt to the new situation created by the pandemic.

The **Commission ended up taking a total of 27,268 testimonies**. Of this total number, **2,048⁸ were taken outside Colombia, 804 in Europe**. The following table outlines the number of interviews that were conducted outside the country:

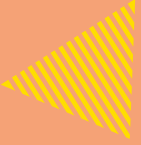
REGION	QUANTITY
Andean Region	235
Central America	198
Europe	804
Bogota Team	220
North America	123
South America	174
Colombian returnees	294
TOTAL	2,048

⁸ The cut-off date of this information is March 2022, although interviews continued to take place until the end of the Commission's mandate.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWERS




The interviewers were crucial actors in the process of the clarification of the truth, particularly in the creation of trust and in supporting victims and witnesses. The following aspects of their work stand out:




Training people outside Colombia, also including victims and exiles, made it possible to establish a broad process of support and legitimacy for the work of the Commission. These people became the face of the Commission concerning victims, which enabled closer contact with the institution.

Having people with access to victims and experience working with them made it possible to create close bonds with the witnesses. The trust and emotional follow-up of victims were one of the central added values of the interviewers, based on their own experiences, knowledge and resources.



Access to resources to carry out an extensive process to support witnesses was a constant challenge, especially in the host countries' rural or remote areas, which created difficulties for close contact and travel costs, which were not always monetarily compensated.

The technological tools made it possible to collect information from different countries. However, some interviewers stated they had difficulties accessing and uploading data to the virtual platform due to the lack of training and the changes in computing procedures. This challenge was more significant for interviewers with little knowledge about technological tools.



“Most of the people opened and closed their treasure [their testimony], they shared it, and therefore there is a final report that honours them and makes them visible.”

Interviewer in Catalonia

3.4. HUBS



German hub event in Berlin,
June 2019.

To encourage civic participation, the ICIP and the commissioner in charge of exile suggested the idea of organising meeting and coordination spaces named hubs or nodes formed by people from different organisations or sectors who were contacted through the work of the Commission in other regions of the world. These spaces had to **bring together organisations of victims, victims not belonging to organisations, Colombians living abroad and international support organisations** (whether public institutions, academia, NGOs and social movements). By bringing together different people and organisations, the hubs also became little processes of dialogue and coex-

istence between different people, which had already occurred during the training of the interviewers.

The following guidelines or principles were established for this process:

- Any victim, organisation of victims and support organisation that wished to could participate in the hubs.
- Hubs were diverse and inclusive spaces that had to create trust and confidence. They encouraged the participation of victims (especially those who

did not belong to organisations) and the process of rebuilding the social fabric and coexistence. They were not a space for the activism of any political party or movement.

- The participation of local organisations was essential to encourage the inclusion of diverse sectors and moderate possible political tensions.
- Hubs did not replace existing organisational processes. Their primary purpose was to contribute to the mandate of the Commission.
- Hubs facilitated the identification of victims who wanted to give their testimony (including when the victim wanted to give a public testimony).
- The number of hubs depended on the organisational capacity of their members. The aim was to organise at least one hub per country. There was no maximum limit of hubs.
- There was no hierarchy between hubs.
- Every hub needed to be recognised by the Commission and act in a way that protected the work and space of the Commission.



“The process enabled us to get to know and acknowledge one another, and work together despite ideological differences.”

Member from the hub in Italy

Once recognised by the Commission, the hubs had the autonomy to organise the activities they deemed appropriate within the framework of the objectives of the Commission. The ICIP and the Commission suggested a range of **possible actions**:

- Collect information from victims' organisations and existing information about migration processes, international protection, case studies, etc.
- Identify people who wanted to share their testimony and put them in contact with people trained for that purpose.
- Organise training sessions (internal or open to the public) on topics such as the peace process, transitional justice, truth commissions, reconciliation, archiving, psychological processes with victims, psychosocial support activities, etc.
- Organise public testimonies if requested by the victim.
- Promote victim recognition activities by local institutional actors.
- Organise analysis sections on patterns of violence or impacts, etc., which contribute to the work of the Commission.
- Facilitate the artistic transformation of testimonies, ideally in collaboration with local artists (photography, poetry, music, painting, theatre...).

The composition and working strategies of the hubs varied according to the context and dynamics in each city or country, with hubs with varying levels of members, diversity and activity and with a greater or lesser role played by victims' organisations and other organisations. For example, some hubs encompassed the efforts of an entire country and other hubs focused their scope of action on a city. This dynamic nature was also

marked by challenges and difficulties that arose. Thus, disagreements throughout the process sometimes led to the breakup and division of hubs, resulting in the creation of two hubs within the same geographic space. The criteria established by the Commission was that it was necessary to facilitate inclusive processes while not forcing the ways of working together and that a goal-oriented approach and the satisfaction of collective work should prevail over a structured organisational arrangement. Flexibility, the action-oriented approach, and the adaptation to the context and the reference groups defined this dynamic of the hubs.



“The mobilisation process carried out by exiles and the Colombian diaspora before the arrival of the Commission provided the perfect foundation for us to succeed.”

Member from the hub in Catalonia



“It has been enriching to learn about the different organisational processes and in different countries and cities in Europe.”

Member from the hub in Belgium

In addition, it was also the case that many organisations, both Colombian migrants and exiles and civil society organisations in the different countries, decided not to join the hubs directly and to work independently on their processes in support of the Commission.



IV Meeting of hubs in Barcelona, April 2022.


In Europe, a total of sixteen hubs were created in ten countries:



ACHIEVEMENTS AND RESULTS OF THE HUBS


The members of the hubs found them to be spaces and dynamics in which they could actively participate and contribute to the task of the Commission from Europe, a cornerstone being the importance of **weaving efforts around common and thematic objectives**. The objectives around the work of the Commission were as follows: a) sharing the idea of peacebuilding and support for the peace agreement, even if it had to be extended to other actors; b) truth is part of peacebuilding; and c) the truth of exile has to be included in the process of the Commission.

Bearing in mind the objectives and dynamic of the hubs, it is possible to highlight the following aspects:



The hubs were spaces for meeting and creating a social network where people of different profiles could participate, including those who did not recognise themselves as victims.

Some hubs managed to develop a feeling of unity that made it possible to overcome differences and compensate for the low expectations of victims due to their mistrust of state institutions or between different political trends or sensibilities.



The process allowed several organisations to meet and create spaces for coordination and contact with other entities and people, both European and from other countries. The process showed the organisational capacity of Colombians abroad to rebuild memory; victims led many organisations and spaces for participation.

The organisational process in the hubs also revealed some obstacles, although not widespread, that it would be necessary to take into consideration for other processes:

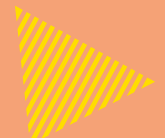
Within some hubs, there were practices of patriarchal treatment and communication. The inter-hub group on gender highlighted that “concerning some decision making, sometimes the violent, macho and destructive mechanisms common in Colombia were replicated”.

In some places there was no team but rather very solitary work that depended on the commitment and capacity of a single person or a few people, sometimes linked to the difficulty of connecting with other people or entities, both Colombian and European.

The dispersal of some hubs was marked by great distances and problems connecting different regions within a single country. In others, victims were close to one another, especially in large cities.

Sometimes, given the magnitude of the process created, the Commission could not meet all the needs or expectations of the process and offer support to tackle the contradictions and difficulties that arose in different hubs, which were exacerbated by the pandemic outbreak.

In short, a member of the hub in France stated that **“the fabric that is rebuilt abroad is very powerful, and it is necessary to preserve it**. It is necessary to ensure that what has been created does not disappear”. In this regard, there is a desire to pass on the legacy to continue the process, with the understanding that the organisational work is an experience that can be useful and inspiring for others.



3.5. INTER-HUB GROUPS



Meeting "Colombian women for a complete truth" of the inter-hub group on gender. Stockholm, October 2021.

As the coordination and participation of the hubs in Europe were gradually consolidated, the need emerged for exchanging information, experiences and ideas and a more effective and better use of data and pedagogical resources. The need also arose to create **joint working spaces for people with thematic affinities**.

In this context, during the second meeting of hubs in Europe, the ICIP proposed the creation of inter-hub working groups, with the premise of them being self-managed spaces by their members. The groups formed had total autonomy and could use the support of the ICIP if required.

There following the inter-hub working groups were established:

- GENDER:**⁹ The group was created during the second meeting of hubs in Barcelona, and it was the most active inter-hub group: it managed to bring together fifty women from different countries, mainly from Europe but also from America, to contribute, with a gender-based perspective, to the objectives of the Commission. With the conviction that truth is not complete without women, the group met up to work on impacts, coping and resistance mechanisms; to characterise problems arising as a result of exile and migration; to encourage training, artistic and advocacy activities for the construction of the memory of exiled women; to support and design events for recognition, and make the work of women visible in personal, organisational and political spheres. Likewise, it became a space for listening and interaction based on profound reflection on the gender approach established in the mandate, with the motivation and expectation of providing material for the final report.
- RELATIVES OF VICTIMS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE:** This group was formed to connect people from Europe looking for family members who had disappeared in Colombia. In February 2019, in Mérida (Spain), they established themselves as the European Group of Relatives of the Disappeared in Colombia, in an activity organised by the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons, and within the work of the Commission, they acted as an inter-hub group of relatives of victims of enforced disappearance. Bringing together relatives in more than ten countries, the group produced a report¹⁰ on enforced disappearances that was submitted to the Commission while continuing their search processes at the same time, supporting one another and providing visibility to enforced disappearances, as well as their impact on families and society.
- SECOND AND THIRD GENERATIONS IN EXILE:** This group was created in Bilbao (Basque Country) as a result of two workshops organised by the Commission: the first, in July 2019, between first and second generations (fathers, mothers, sons and daughters) and the second, in November of the same year, with only second generations. Significant work was carried out to create content through audiovisual and creative languages, and it played a central role in contributing to the objective of non-repetition of the conflict.
- ETHNIC APPROACH:** Faced with the high levels of invisibility of Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples, and also exiles and refugees, the International Ethnic Board of Exiles and Refugees for the Coordination and Implementation
- PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT:** This inter-hub group was created to support the different processes of the Commission in exile, with a particular emphasis on support, training and emotional containment during the testimony-taking process. Also, the group carried out support work at other events and activities that could impact victims, such as the exile recognition process.
- RECOGNITION OF VICTIMS:** This group played a central role in 2020 in identifying the characteristics and actions for the recognition of Colombian exiles by the Commission and coordinating and carrying out related activities in the different countries. The restrictions on mobility and meeting significantly impacted its work during the pandemic.



“It was beautiful, intimate and personal; it filled me with peace of mind after many years of silence [...]. It was important to say what I thought and believed.”

Member of the inter-hub group on gender

⁹ The meaning of the collective work with a focus on gender, calling for respect, trust, inclusion and care, among other aspects, of the inter-hub group on gender is outlined in the *Declaración de sentimientos e intenciones*.

¹⁰ Otras voces; Familiares Europa Abya Yala de Personas Desaparecidas en Colombia. *Desde el exilio seguimos buscando. Sus voces, nuestras memorias*. Hegoa; Truth Commission, 2021.



Mandala of the second generation group.
Bilbao, 2019.

of Peace in Colombia sought to provide visibility for the discrimination, impacts and processes of resistance of Afro-descendant, indigenous, Raizal and Palenquera communities abroad, through the submission of a report to the Commission and the collection of testimonies. The group has members in Spain, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, France, the United States, Ecuador, Canada and Colombia.

Aside from these inter-hub groups, there were other one-off spaces for coordination and action. For example, at the beginning of the European activity, the ICIP organised an exchange between the entities seeking funding in several countries. The initiatives to promote inter-hub groups in the academic, communication and pedagogical fields were not consolidated, mainly due to the lack of clear objectives and guidelines and the availability of time and resources of the people involved in the process.

Taking into account the process of each inter-hub group, the following aspects can be highlighted:

- They emerged organically according to the needs of the process. Likewise, their implementation and, in some cases, their termination or progress were also marked by advances in the process itself.

- They enabled a new channel for participation and dialogue with different people from the Commission, which contributed to oxygenating hubs dynamics that were somewhat stagnant and created a new collective energy.
- They enriched both the work of the Commission and the hubs; they contributed to specific subjects and acted as a space for continuing the common objectives of organisations and people committed to peace and human rights.
- They encouraged the collaboration of people who were not necessarily participating actively in the hubs and opened up communication channels in different countries in America.



“Up until now there was only silence.”

Member of the inter-hub group of second generations

3.6. FUNDING

The process to support the Commission abroad was based on the **voluntary work of hundreds of people worldwide**, victims' organisations and local entities that contributed their time and resources to the objectives of the Commission in a self-managed and selfless way. During the initial months of the process, the international work was carried out without economic resources due to the impossibility of using resources from the Colombian national budget for working abroad and the lack of sensitivity in international cooperation about what exile meant.

The most significant difficulty in accessing the resources of donor countries in places such as Europe is that the instruments for supporting peace and human rights are allocated to countries in conflict. The search for economic resources for the work of the Commission and organisations of victims and the support of victims highlighted that **donor countries and international cooperation do not have agile mechanisms for supporting the task of peace-building that the diaspora of countries in conflict carries out in the host countries**. At the same time, donor countries prefer to work with entities capable of managing significant sums of money rather than with small organisations in civil society.

Multilaterally, the Commission managed to gain the support of several United Nations agencies: the International Organization for Migration (IOM) contributed resources to start the international work of the Commission; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Colombia contributed technical, financial elements and relationships

with the UNHCR offices in some countries such as Mexico; and, also, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the IOM acted as resource management entities for international cooperation.

Also, in Europe, several national organisations were successful in applying for and managing resources to work in their respective countries with the support of the Commission, such as those shown in the following table:

MANAGEMENT ENTITY	FUNDING ENTITY
Swisspeace (Switzerland)	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of the Swiss Confederation
Swedish Foundation for Human Rights (Sweden)	ForumCiv
CAPAZ Institute (Germany)	Federal Foreign Office of the German Government
Caritas Norway (Norway)	Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
International Organization for Migration (United Kingdom)	Embassy of the United Kingdom in Colombia
Hegoa Institute (Basque Country)	Directorate of Human Rights, Victims and Diversity of the Basque Government and UNDP Colombia
ICIP (Catalonia)	Own resources and Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation

The decentralised cooperation in Catalonia and the Basque Country provided economic resources for both working in their context and Spain as a whole and even in European countries that did not obtain funding, such as France, Italy, Belgium and Denmark. The Hegoa Institute (Institute for International Cooperation and Development Studies) served as a management entity of the funds granted by the Directorate of Human Rights, Victims and Diversity of the Basque Government from 2019 until December 2022 and by UNDP Colombia in 2019 and 2020. The ICIP managed resources provided by the Catalan Agency for Cooperation Development (ACCD) and its own resources.

In short, for actions carried out directly in Europe, the resources were mainly allocated to the following:

- Human resources and technical procurement.
- Meetings and workshops: training for taking testimonies, psychosocial training, meetings of the hubs and the working groups, etc.
- Taking testimonies.
- Psychosocial support for interviewers and witnesses.

- Preparation of reports and secondary sources.
- Communication and pedagogical efforts: public events, videos, exhibitions, graphic novel, etc.

Also, it is essential to highlight the economic and human resources provided by organisations and local entities to carry out actions in countries such as France (Paris and Toulouse), Belgium, Italy and Spain (Madrid, Valencia and Andalusia). The commitment and meaning of the work for truth supporting the Commission were decisive for this social mobilisation.

Although the process showed an inevitable inequality in the access to economic resources between the different countries, the challenge of seeking funding for several victims' organisations encouraged them to talk to cooperation agencies and Governments on their behalf. This, in turn, involved opening channels of information and conversation with European governments on peace in Colombia and the migratory policies of the host countries. The work with the Colombian diaspora showed the need to support the task of peacebuilding and human rights of the diaspora from within the cooperation agencies themselves. This observation provides an opportunity to encourage political and administrative initiatives from donor countries to also work with the diasporas from other countries in conflict or in transition to peace.

INSTITUTION	HUMAN RESOURCES	OWN ECONOMIC RESOURCES	EXTERNAL ECONOMIC RESOURCES
Hegoa Institute	One person		449,000 euros from the Directorate of Human Rights of the Basque Government (up to December 2022) 70,000 Euros through UNDP Colombia
ICIP	Two people *and the link of a technical third party (2020-2021), management and the communications team	350,000 euros	150,000 euros from the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation

4. KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PROCESS



4.1. EXPECTATIONS AND BUILDING TRUST

Making the work of the Commission in exile as participatory a process as possible was a fundamental principle from the start of the mandate. Including a great amalgam of people, organisations and public institutions and reaching the most significant number of victims was a constant challenge and an essential objective. The historic milestone marked by signing the peace agreement and creating a complex Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice and Reparation in Colombia and the Truth Commission was viewed as a unique opportunity to tell and know the truth. Thus, the hubs, victims and organisations had a very high level of involvement from the start of the mandate. Many times, the Commission received unconditional support from exile.

In general, the expectations placed on the Commission by the people involved, especially by Colombian victims, were very high, justified and legitimate. They hoped their testimonies would be relevant and valuable for drafting the final report. The Commission was expected to contribute to the narration, visibility and recognition of the effects and impacts of Colombian exile. For many victims, reaching out to the Commission meant breaking decades of silence, and from the outset, it was seen as an encouraging and healing opportunity. In turn, recognition by the Commission of Victims' organisations that had been working for years abroad in different spheres was an ambition that resulted in the incorporation of some working methodologies and the selection of Colombians already involved in the composition of the group of interviewers.

However, despite operating independently and autonomously, the Commission remained an institution of the Colombian state that needed to gain the trust of victims abroad, who had been practically invisible up until then. In general, previous experiences of approaching victims had not been successful. The Colombians outside the country and the members of the Commission's International Macro-territory were very aware of this fact. Therefore, in the beginning, they devoted a lot of work to educating and explaining in different spaces what their mission was going to be and what their objectives were and dispelling any doubts about their mandate abroad. Thus, several information sessions took place in the hubs, outreach events of the Commission were held with the support of local organisations or academia and communications materials were also created.¹¹

The Commission was established in an adverse context —facing a failed referendum and with a new Government in charge of the implementation of agreements that had a negative attitude towards the peace agreement— and it encountered different obstacles during the mandate, along with a smear campaign that sought to impact its credibility, also abroad. This situation led to a perception —and the commitment of many people— that **participation in the process of the Commission meant legitimising, protecting, and safeguarding it.**

Building trust in the different spaces was a constant and cross-cutting challenge that arose at several levels. Firstly, establishing trust with the Commis-

¹¹ For example, *21 claves para conocer la Comisión de la Verdad*.

sion itself and, in turn, with the ICIP as the technical secretariat in Europe. Secondly, the trust between the people active in the process, which, as we mentioned, sometimes came from very different personal and political backgrounds. Thirdly, the confidence of the victims in the process itself, especially in a context of great distrust in Colombian state institutions, with prior disappointing and challenging experiences. During the process, it was a constant challenge to access victims for them to give their testimony. This difficulty was fuelled by their lack of knowledge of the mechanisms of participation, by being in a precarious situation and, sometimes, in the process of seeking international protection. However, in turn, it also highlights the meaning of defending their rights; therefore, many people gave their testimony with the desire that their story would contribute to the truth and that they would finally be able to talk in a context of trust.



“I never thought there would be someone who wanted to listen to us.”

Victim from Sweden

Trust is an element in individual and group relationships that does not occur automatically but requires minimum agreements to know what trust is being placed in. In this regard, the aim of bringing together different ways of working collectively makes it necessary to find common ground of agreement, **and giving the victims a central role in building a plural and diverse truth was one of the objectives of the Commission.** As mentioned, each hub, organisation or person carried out their work based on a different

reality, contributing their claims and expectations regarding exile. In general, **with the work coordinated with and for the Commission, many Colombians overcame the fear of expressing their pain** because there was trust for people to say what they felt.

On the other hand, access to information and its safekeeping was one of the challenges and achievements in building trust. It was essential to guarantee that any entity would not consult or tamper with the testimonies. Even so, there were cases of people who ultimately did not give their testimony due to this fear, with the worry that their perpetrators or, in some cases, the authorities themselves would have access to recordings or documents, as well as others who later regretted not doing so. Likewise, the consent signed by victims and witnesses was essential to guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality. This required specific education with information for victims, as previously explained. For these reasons, adopting measures to archive the information collected and to ensure its preservation was a cross-cutting concern in the taking of testimonies.

Thus, despite resistance, there were several successful experiences in building trust throughout the process. One of the lessons learned relates to the **importance of combining pedagogical exercises and communication to disseminate the work and message of the Commission** with psychosocial activities and workshops. This perspective of psychosocial approach to victims and the Colombian diaspora in different countries, which included exercises with methodologies based on music, literature and theatre, to mention a few examples, made it possible to connect with people from different places through emotions, which contributes to the processes of individual and collective healing and, in turn, it creates bonds of trust and commitment.

4.2. LISTENING

Testimony is a narration of events that shares a traumatic experience formed by impacts, grief, fears, silence, anger and frustration, but also resilience, resistance and the rebuilding of a life plan as a survivor on an individual and collective level. Therefore, the clarification of the truth entails fulfilling the task of collecting information to be included in a report and a mechanism for reviewing the events that took place during the armed conflict in Colombia. **The aim was for the victims to recall it in a genuine and original way to feel dignified and recognised from the first contact.**

Interviewers who were victims of the conflict

Most of the interviewers were of Colombian origin. The fact that many of them were themselves victims of the armed conflict had a dual purpose: on the one hand, it enabled greater empathy and understanding in the process of listening and collecting testimonies; on the other, being appointed as an interviewer by the Commission became an act of institutional recognition of that person. However, this initiative also entailed a unique challenge: taking a testimony could awaken memories in the interviewer/victim of their own traumatic experience of victimisation and exile, and it was necessary to have people with the capacity to listen empathetically but also able to conduct the interviews and deal with their own pain and the impact of what they have heard. In this regard, several people trained as interviewers ultimately stopped



“Tongues that had never told their stories were untied.”

Member of the hub in Toulouse, South of France

taking testimonies or took only a limited number of them. However, there were also victim interviewers who took a significant number.

Some European interviewers participated in organisations for human rights or peacebuilding in Colombia, contributing to the added value of the commitment of people in the societies where the exiled population resides. For some unique interviews, an “external” perspective was justified bringing a different and precious understanding to the testimonial processes of transitional nature and relating to collective memory.



Detail of the mosaic of remembrance, an initiative of the Swiss hub.

It could be carried out individually or collectively, privately or publicly, which was determined through the prior agreement between the interviewer and the witnesses. This was particularly crucial in the case of witnesses speaking for the first time and who thus required privacy and special conditions. In contrast, other witnesses were already experienced and had previously made their experience visible.

In Europe, a significant number of testimonies were provided by women. By having their testimonies taken, these women felt they had been cared for, listened to and recognised.

Each victim has its own way of opening up, its impacts, grief, memory and truth. Interpreting these characteristics, situations, and intentions was possible thanks to the consensual listening and empathy generated between the interviewer and the witness.

As a result, several victims and witnesses stated that the listening process allowed them to recover spaces, people and feelings. For example, it is noteworthy that the process brought together two generations who could discuss what happened to them and that many families who broke the silence are being rebuilt.

The challenge of convening victims

Throughout the process, **the main difficulty put forward by several interviewers was locating and convening victims who wanted to give their testimony.** The interviewers and hubs observed that most of the victims do not belong to victims' organisations and that most of the Colombian population abroad had little information about the peace agreement and the transitional justice system and, by extension, about the work of the Truth Commission and the chance to contribute a testimony. In this regard, the hubs significantly contributed to informing citizens, inviting victims to participate and clarifying expectations about the listening process. People who were closer to and had more contact with a wide range of victims were the ones who attained a more significant number of testimonies.

The processes of listening and taking the testimony of victims were carried out through a conversation that was considered confidential for the exclusive use of the Commission, handled with security protocols and not shared with other entities or individuals. The testimony was comprised of a complex process which included, as a minimum, three moments: a) contact with the person who was going to be interviewed (before the interview), b) listening (during the interview), and c) support (after the interview).

4.3. RECOGNITION

For the Commission, **recognition is a process that encourages spaces for understanding and internalising the damage and impacts caused as part of the need to name and give a face to the conflict.**

The recognition of exile, victims abroad and returnees was based on the limited information and reflection that exists in Colombia around this exile. Thus, the aim was to recognise:

- Because of the armed conflict, Colombian people were forced to leave the country amid harrowing situations and rootlessness.
- From the perspective of non-repetition, how these Colombians and their organisations have resisted, faced the situation and remained abroad, and their reflections on guaranteeing international protection and peace in Colombia.
- The effects and impacts on the children of these Colombians and their family units and their contributions to peacebuilding.
- The lack of protection and state neglect of people who have suffered or still suffer exile and the human, social and financial costs of exile for these people, their families, Colombian society and the country.

In turn, recognition sought to consider contexts, explanations, and analyses about what made it possible and the transformations required to ensure that a situation like this is not repeated.



“Working with the Commission has enabled me to find out who I am as a Colombian woman, where I am and how to contribute.”

Member from the hub in Germany

One of the main actions for recognition was the Meetings for Truth. The Commission defined them as “spaces for the construction of meaning about the past and future, not only for victims, but also for institutions and society as a whole, which bring into play or appeal to different human dimensions such as the affective, symbolic, educational and political, precisely to generate collective reflections that lead to recognising and rejecting the legacy of those acts of violence and domination, unlawful means and revenge, and which are used to obtain measures for non-repetition”. In the case of exile, the Commission carried out the Meeting for Truth: “The return of our voices” (13 November 2020, virtual) and “Recognition of exile in the borders with Colombia” (27 February 2021, in Ibarra, Ecuador). In the case of “The return of our voices”, the main act to recognise exile was carried out simultaneously in Bogota (Colombia) and Bilbao (Basque Country) and had over 16,000 reproductions on the broadcast on the

Facebook page of the Commission, 7,600 plays on the YouTube channel of the Commission and more than 9,500 on the YouTube channel of *El Tiempo* (on 21 December 2022). Also, this work was accompanied by a media strategy that resulted in a significant presence in the media in Colombia and also internationally. It was the most followed act of recognition of those carried out by the Commission during its mandate, which shows how important it was not only for the Colombian population in exile but also for many people in Colombia who “saw” people in exile for the first time.

Concerning victims, the expectations were very high for the recognition, what it could represent for them, and their participation in the management and design of the Meetings for Truth. As a result of this process, the victims themselves highlighted that **it was possible to make the voice of the exiled community visible and heard in Colombia.**

The Meetings shook up the emotions of many people since the act of recognition was public and political, and they generated a mixture of satisfaction and weariness. Many people were exhausted after the Meetings due to the required work and involvement and the emotional impacts they entailed.



“The fact that the act was loaded with the subjectivity of the stories generated reactions and conversations in families and groups that had remained in silence.”

Member of the hub in France

In addition to these two acts of recognition of victims, the Commission promoted a process to recognise the interviewees, “Listening to those who listened”, on 10 July 2021, to pay tribute to those who took testimonies of the Colombian exile.

Additionally, although the Commission promoted the central axis of recognition, different acts for recognising victims were held in various places on a local level, aimed at making victims visible and recognising them in their host societies.

Recognising victims in exile and making them visible constituted a starting point for their healing processes. The symbolism and care accompanying these recognition processes, both individual and collective, also contributed to a symbolic reparation that always had victims in the centre.

LOCAL RECOGNITION OF THE COLOMBIAN DIASPORA AND EXILE¹²

The ICIP, along with the hub in Catalonia, carried out a process of local recognition of the Colombian diaspora and victims by authorities and social actors in their places of residence abroad.

This process was based on workshops in the municipalities of Lleida, Sabadell and Barcelona to provide information on the peace process in Colombia and on the rights of victims and to identify the needs and specific requests of the Colombian community concerning its public and institutional recognition.

In these cities, the municipal authorities made institutional statements that focused on the dignity of victims and on ensuring that their processes of resistance and resilience and their contributions to peace in Colombia and in the host society were publicly recognised.

These initiatives were organised with local organisations that are committed and work with and for Colombia and/or migrants.



7th Meeting for Truth of the Commission: «The Return of Our Voices». Bogota, November 2020.

¹² ICIP. *El reconeixement local a la població colombiana a l'exili*, 2021 [Infographic].

4.4. THE PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH

The psychosocial approach is one of the frameworks for understanding and action in participation processes for developing objectives, strategies, dimensions and territories of the mandate of the Commission. It is conceived as **a field of knowledge and interdisciplinary action, crossed by perspectives relating to the mind, emotions and psychology** and, in turn, with the social view of law, politics, culture, sociology, anthropology and the environment. It aims to understand the impacts of the armed conflict on victims and those responsible. As outlined in the *Training manual on the psychosocial approach*,¹³ in the process of clarification, the psychosocial approach contributes to the transformative approach of the testimonies, the analyses of the causes of violence, the social and human impacts of the conflict, and confrontation and resistance. In acts of recognition, it encourages emotional care and forms of symbolic meaning. For coexistence and non-repetition, it contributes to managing pain, overcoming stigma and deconstructing the enemy.

As previously mentioned, speaking and listening have implications before, during and after the testimony. From the outset, the Commission sought to ensure that the interviewers and victims had the psychosocial support required in those phases. However, taking testimonies generated a demand for support; therefore, it was challenging for the interviewers to provide it promptly and appropriately. At times, they relied on the participation of the psychosocial team of the Commission. In some cases, it was detected

that the victim was overwhelmed by the testimony and that the Commission did not have the scope to offer psychological support in so many countries and situations. In practice, the interviewers and hubs sought to meet needs, so some groups made specific commitments to have psychologists, and at other times there were those who, individually, offered themselves to make the testimony an experience that was as restorative and healing as possible, while trying to close it in the best way.



“Working on listening in the most holistic way possible, for memory and truth, and enabling the testimony to transform into something positive and dignifying, even healing, for those who are listened to but also for those who listen.”

Member of the psychosocial inter-hub group

At the start of the testimony-taking process, the demand and the responses for psychosocial support were dispersed, and a centralised and coordinated strategy was required. This was how the psychosocial inter-hub group was created, which encouraged the approach and positioned it as necessary and cross-cutting in the European process, intending to offer a support network to victims and witnesses who required it. At the same time, the inter-hub group on gender was created based on this call for women's care and support; that is, it was created with a clear and specific gender-based perspective. The psychosocial team of the Commission itself in Colombia provided advice for cases where victims required special assistance. The hubs, especially some interviewers, created a map identifying people who could provide support in the different countries.

Although some victims did not want to avail of psychological support, their participation in spaces or activities based on the psychosocial approach—for example, through different artistic actions—contributed to getting these people to share profound stories about their experiences. In general, it is considered that the psychosocial matter should have been addressed in greater depth and from the outset due to its crucial importance in these complex truth processes, taking into account central aspects such as the dispersal of victims in each country and their diversity. However, responding to and comprehensively tackling this matter was challenging, mainly due to the lack of resources and the great size that the process grew.



“Thanks for believing in me. I have had a lot of support from all my companions to weave my story together.”

Member of the hub in Norway

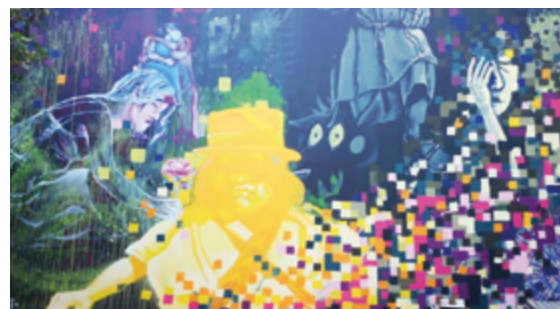
¹³ Truth Commission. *Manual de formación en enfoque psicosocial: dirigido a los equipos de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición*. The Commission, [2019].

4.5. HEALING ART, SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND CREATIVITY

The role of art in peacebuilding has, at several times and in different contexts, constituted a tool that encourages dialogue with an extraordinary capacity for personal and collective transformation. Thus, artistic and creative actions in their diverse expressions, as a particular part of the psychosocial approach, were essential in the different stages of the process of the Commission in exile. In this process, the artistic aspect was implemented in other spaces and distinct spheres, resulting in different expressions from the publication of the graphic novel *Transparentes. Historias del exilio colombiano* (Trans-parents. Stories of Colombians in exile), the documentary *Para volverte a ver* (To see you again), about the contribution of exile and the Colombian diaspora in Europe to the Commission, and the transformation of testimony taking into poems or even books, such as *Una maleta colombiana* (A Colombian suitcase).

It is worth highlighting that there were already positive examples of the use of art in the field of memory and peacebuilding by exile organisations, mainly from women, and some of the existing actions and methodologies were applied and exhibited during the mandate of the Commission.

The healing character of artistic practice and its immense transformative capacity and contribution to the creation of safe spaces and the encouragement of coexistence was a very present element in the process and the experience of the Commission. Thus, from the start of the mandate, the hubs gradually included activities into their action plans that met these needs.



Mural of the hub in the South of France. Toulouse, 2019.

Art's transformative and healing capacity is also highlighted in the impactful and direct effect on the victims who decided to testify to the Commission. This enormous creativity and the potential for individual and collective transformation were reflected in other works of art, such as books, poems, exhibitions, photographs and stories.



“Art is a report without words.”

Member of the hub in Italy

During the systematisation process of the Commission's work, some interviewees created pictures including central elements of the listening process. And some witnesses also outlined their experiences through drawing and writing.



Members of the hub in the UK weaving fabric in 2022.



Drawing by a witness, made during the process of documenting the experience.



Drawings from the inter-hub group on gender. Stockholm, 2021.

Some examples of artistic and communicative materials produced by the different hubs and inter-hub groups are:

VIDEOS

["Verdad / Wahrheit" \(Truth / Wahrheit\)](#)
Germany Hub

["Muralla de voces" \(Wall of voices\)](#)
United Kingdom Hub

["Necesidad actual de protección y asilo a líderes y lideresas colombianas" \(Current need for protection and asylum for Colombian leaders\)](#)
Sweden Hub

["Abordando fragmentos de una maleta colombiana" \(Addressing fragments of a Colombian suitcase\)](#)
Toulouse, South of France, Hub

["Nos encontramos para encontrarles" \(We meet to find them\)](#)
Inter-hub group on enforced disappearance

["Ser segunda generación en el exilio" \(Being the second generation in exile\)](#)
Inter-hub group of second generations

EXHIBITIONS

["Reconóceme: La Colombia exiliada en Euskadi" \(Acknowledge me: The Colombia exiled in the Basque Country\)](#)
Basque Country Hub

["Voces desde la otra orilla" \(Voices from the other shore\)](#)
France Hub

["Más allá de la experiencia del exilio" \(Beyond the experience of exile\)](#)
Switzerland Hub

SONGS

["Surcos de amor" \(Furrows of love\) and "Vuelve" \(Come back\)](#)
Catalonia Hub

["Reconóceme" \(Acknowledge me\)](#)
Madrid Hub

POSTCARDS

["Objetos de memoria" \(Objects of memory\)](#)
Denmark Hub

PODCASTS

["La verdad del exilio" \(The truth of exile\)](#)
Belgium Hub

["Semillantes"](#)
Inter-hub group on gender

ACTIVITIES

["Memorarte" – International Festival of Memory](#)
Italy Hub

["Las verdades del exilio. La Colombia fuera de Colombia" \(The truths of exile. The Colombia outside of Colombia\)](#)
Andalusia Hub

["Una verdad sin fronteras: el rol de las víctimas en el exilio" \(Truth without borders: the role of victims in exile\)](#)
Norway Hub

["Capítulo Exilio. Entrega del Informe Final" \(Exile Chapter. Submission of the Final Report\)](#)
Hub of Victims in Sweden

["Los colores de la Verdad" \(The colours of truth\)](#)
Valencia Hub

Spain



Inter-hub group on enforced disappearance



Sweden



Norway



Inter-hub group of second generations



United Kingdom



Denmark



Germany



Belgium



France



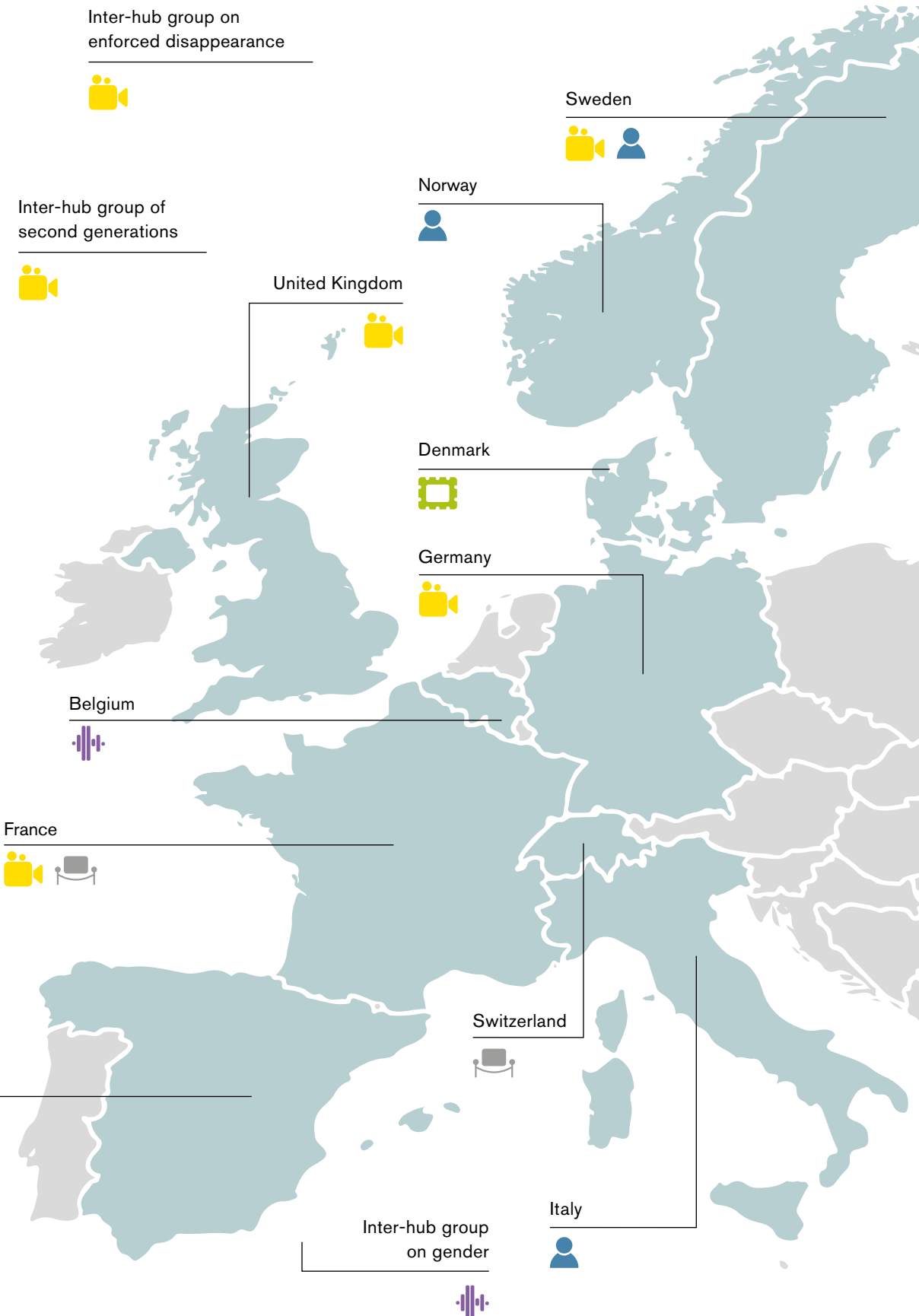
Switzerland



Inter-hub group on gender



Italy



4.6. COMMUNICATION

A participatory process of this calibre entailed the challenge of generating and managing information flows in an understandable, transparent and agile way. Specific WhatsApp groups and email lists were created to facilitate communication between the different actors in the process (by theme and country, in some cases). Once the hubs' work was consolidated, it was possible to develop a website for the hubs in Europe¹⁴ (managed by the CAPAZ Institute) and a Facebook page for the support hubs of the Commission abroad.¹⁵

A large amount of information was shared and generated, but this did not guarantee that everyone involved in the process had constant access to it, whether due to excess information, which caused a saturation of messages or because not everyone had the time or the necessary resources to monitor the communication channels mentioned above.

The latter aspect increased with the COVID-19 pandemic. People who were part of the process stated that the pandemic created a dependency on technology, which in turn became a barrier that impacted the collective dynamic. Not everyone could operate in the virtual world or was confident enough to participate through these mechanisms. Beyond the impact of the pandemic, other obstacles were also detected in communication, such as the high level of bureaucracy and the increased workload by the Commission in Bogota; the lack, at times, of a clear

direction in the planning and implementation of actions, and a certain lack of coordination in terms of establishing contacts and responses with the hubs. This sometimes resulted in a lack of appropriate and specific answers, which were felt as “abandonment” or “neglect” at certain times.

Despite communication difficulties, it was possible to make the voice of the exiled community visible and heard in Colombia.



“We made the voice of the exiled community heard in Colombia. We put exile and the current situation of the armed conflict onto the stage of history.”

Member of the hub in Denmark



Presentation of the book *Una maleta colombiana* (A Colombian suitcase). Barcelona, April 2021.

¹⁴ [Nodos en Europa. Comisión de la Verdad. \[Website\].](#)

¹⁵ [Comisión de la Verdad de Colombia - Nodos de apoyo en el exterior. \[Website\].](#)

5. THE COMMISSION'S LEGACY



The legacy of the Commission is encapsulated in the conclusions and recommendations of its final report, which becomes an agenda for the country. This legacy is also central to the process and what was created and learned in the many events and spaces.

The final report, “There is future if there is truth” (eleven volumes and more than ten thousand pages), contains a summary of 74 recommendations for the non-repetition of the armed conflict, structured around the following subjects: peacebuilding; victims; democracy; drug trafficking; impunity and access to justice; security; territorial peace; cultural transformations, and legacy.

To follow up on implementing the recommendations, the Commission selected a Follow-up and Monitoring Committee, formed by seven members, with a mandate of seven years. In recognition of exile, one of its members lives abroad (Barcelona). The roles of the Committee include the following:

- Follow-up and monitoring of the implementation of recommendations.
- Dialogue with different victims and human rights organisations.
- Production of regular reports for following up recommendations, which will have to have a territorial, differential and gender-based approach.
- Widespread dissemination of reports in the national and regional media.



“The recommendations that we delivered to the country are a new commitment to a great peace a complete peace, which should enable us all to have our rights guaranteed, and to be recognised in our diversity, and in which dialogue should be the main tool for dealing with differences and resolving conflicts. We need a peace that dignifies life and enables a dignified life for everyone without distinction.”¹⁶

*Findings and recommendations.
Truth Commission*

¹⁶ Beristain, Carlos Martín (dir.). *Findings and recommendations*. Truth Commission, 2022.

5.1. THE LEGACY OF THE PROCESS IN EXILE



Presentation of the final report "There is future if there is truth". Parliament of Catalonia, July 2022.

The Commission's final report, "There is future if there is truth", includes a volume devoted to Colombian exile, "**The Colombia outside of Colombia**". In the process of producing this chapter, there is broad recognition that the Commission has created inclusive spaces in exile and that, almost four years after its creation, it leaves a valuable internal process. This process has strengthened relations between the Colombian community and rebuilt a social fabric abroad. In this regard, there has been an **appeal to guarantee that this broad social fabric does not**

disappear with the end of the mandate. The structures created, the experience of organisational work and the many lessons learned were essential during these years, and it is agreed that this experience may be of interest in other processes or contexts.

Many of the victims interviewed agree that the process was precious for them and has enabled them to get to know and meet with victims from other places. This has provided great richness and strength and significantly contributed to their cohesion.



"A commitment was made, but it is perceived to be at risk because fewer and fewer people are participating in the hub. The enthusiasm with which it started has been lost."

Member of the hub in Valencia

It is considered that the exercise of listening, which is central in the work of the Commission, managed to convey justice to victims and constitutes a real hope that the truth of victims abroad will be helpful for peacebuilding in Colombia. Providing visibility for exile and the stories told also contributes to a symbolic reparation and recognition of victims.

Likewise, the potential of young people and the second generations of exiled Colombians is another essential question arising from the work of the Commission abroad. This process, including intergenerational conversations, also challenged them and helped them to shape their identity. Their commitment through experiences and bonds is already a gain for the process and the future of peace in Colombia.



"We have to continue working; much progress has been made, and there is still a lot to do."

Member of the hub in Switzerland

Before the conclusion of the Commission's mandate, doubts were presented about what would happen afterwards and how victims would be included in the subsequent follow-up of the recommendations of the final report. It was considered that it could be possible to reach more people with the publication of the report; therefore, the process did not end with the mandate of the Commission.



"There have been cases of people who did not want to give their testimony during the mandate who want to do so having seen the report, and some even want to expand their story."

Interviewer in Germany

6. LESSONS LEARNED



Participative processes are complex but necessary

When defining how it would seek out testimonies in exile, the Commission could have chosen the “easy” option of recruiting a team or an institution to identify and interview a specific number of victims. It would have been a pragmatic decision, not at all surprising, faced with the enormous challenges of the mission as a whole. However, the Commission chose the “difficult” path: it took on the change of starting with the existing social capital and opening the doors to civic participation, practically without conditions. The doors were open to any victim or any organisation that shared the aims of the Commission to play a role in it. This path was much more complex: contacting and building trust with all the organisations of victims and supporting victims; creating a shared aim among people and organisations with different, and even opposing, political perspectives; embarking on an adventure without precedents to learn from; beginning the journey without guaranteed economic resources. And, yet, it worked. Thus, the participative process became an objective in itself, with the victims and care of people at its centre. The trust that the Commission placed in exile helped exiles, in turn, to put their trust in the Commission. A virtuous dynamic was created: the victims and supporting organisations contributed their personal experience, a network of contacts and time. Faced with a political context in Colombia that was unfavourable for its work, the enthusiastic commitment of exiles contributed to legitimising, supporting and protecting the Commission. In turn, by giving exiles a key role, the Commission began an early process of symbolic recognition before the formal acts of recognition that would come later.

The commitment to encouraging maximum citizen participation was bold. Time showed that it was a great decision. When its mandate ended, the main guarantee for keeping the legacy of the Commission

alive and ensuring the implementation of the recommendations of the final report are the victims who have felt they have had starring roles in this task of documenting the truth and promoting coexistence.

Exile and diaspora must be seen and understood in all their magnitude and diversity

Not all victims see themselves as such, not all victims are in organisations, and not all victims in organisations think the same way.

In contexts with several thousands of victims, they may likely feel or prefer to think that what was done to them is insignificant compared to other cases that they perceive as being more awful. At the same time, one of the ways to escape the trauma of victimisation is by trying to minimise or even forget its impact. Many victims do not request protection, asylum or refuge, whether not to go through a bureaucratic procedure that could victimise them again, to avoid alarming relatives and friends or because there are more accessible options.



“Along the way, we have learned where the essence of being Colombian is to be found. We recognise that we are all over the world, scattered by the conflict”

Member of the hub of victims in Sweden

On the other hand, exile is as diverse as the population of the country of origin. The exiled population is expected to mix in circles with political, cultural, ethnic or other affinities. These groups can have perspectives, interests and proposals that are very different, even contradictory. It is necessary to have a common objective to create a process that brings such diverse people together. In the case of Colombia, the common goal was supporting the work of the Truth Commission. In other contexts, synergies will be decisive in identifying the issues or initiatives with a cross-cutting capacity to convene people.

Diasporas are agents of peace, human rights and democracy

The forced departure from the country of origin can be a traumatic process. Starting from scratch in an unknown social, political, and cultural context is necessary. It is essential to rebuild networks of affection in the country of destination while direct contact is lost with relatives and friends in the land of origin. At best, exile offers decent living conditions, but it does not usually recognise professional experience, and it nullifies the capacity for political advocacy. In many cases, the exiled person ends up in a situation of economic precariousness and social isolation and faces racism and institutional and social xenophobia.

The country that drives people out loses essential social and political capital for the democratic health of society as a whole. The host country can gain this capital if it recognises and encourages it.

Public policies on peace, human rights and humanitarian aid need to incorporate exiles as actors and social and political subjects, moving beyond the perspective of migrants being passive subjects who are recipients or beneficiaries of social initiatives and public policy. In turn, it is possible to promote

dialogue and consultation between the diversity of victims in exile as an opportunity to encourage co-existence, coordinate and join forces for peace processes or democratic strengthening in their country of origin.

Taking testimonies and active listening have a transformative power

The guarantee of the right to truth and the construction of broad memories that include the different voices of victims and people affected by the conflicts in all their plurality is essential to progress on sustainable peace processes. The Commission's final report includes the experiences of many people who had not been listened for years. It is a rearview mirror to acknowledge the horrors of war and, simultaneously, a compass to point the way towards an inclusive horizon where nobody is superfluous.



“Each person had a little piece of truth, regardless of what comes out in the report.”

Victim of the hub in Madrid

Creating spaces for victims to share their personal and intimate experiences, suffering and resistance in depth can have a reparative role if it is carried out with comprehensive support through active listening and a psychosocial perspective. In many cases, creativity is a central element for narrating and conveying a testimony, and it is necessary to support the

victims themselves to explore and find different ways and languages to get through their pain and share their stories.

For these processes, as shown by the experience of the Commission, having victims of the conflict in charge of taking testimonies and listening to other victims, rather than relying on academics or jurists, can facilitate interviews and, in turn, create synergies and trust. This strategy can contribute to the healing processes of both the witness and the interviewer.

In the absence of formal processes, society can encourage its own

To carry out its mandate, the Commission learned from previous experiences around the world. It adapted them to its own circumstances, and it has now become a benchmark for other peace and reconciliation processes. No other country has paid so much attention to the mechanisms of transitional justice to try to combine the rights to truth, justice, reparation and the guarantees of non-repetition. However, at the moment, there are few countries around the world affected by armed conflicts or authoritarian regimes where it is possible to glimpse a peace agreement or democratic transition; therefore, the experience of the Colombian Commission may remain a unique benchmark that is not replicated.

Given this perspective, a creative and committed approach is recommended. The processes for taking testimonies, promoting dialogue and raising awareness and public denunciation that have characterised the work of the Colombian victims do not only depend on the existence of an institutional framework. In fact, organisations for victims and supporting victims abroad have been carrying out this work for many years.

We hope the experience described in this document will inspire other international initiatives and provide hope in difficult situations and, perhaps, a perspective and approach that enable new synergies and a significant impact, both in the country of origin and in the host country.



“No one can take away historical memory and nor can the creation of everything that the hubs have produced.”

Member of the hub in the United Kingdom

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