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Archives of Human Rights and Historical Memory: An Analysis of Archival Practices 'From Below' in Four NGOs in Colombia

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Cover Page Footnote

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ARCHIVES OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND HISTORICAL MEMORY: AN ANALYSIS OF ARCHIVAL PRACTICES “FROM BELOW” IN FOUR NGOS IN COLOMBIA

This article considers the archives of four Colombian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on victims of conflict with differential approaches.¹ Each of these NGOs collects and curates a substantial body of material related to their work, their activities, and the victims they represent. Their materials thus comprise a form of unofficial, grassroots archives of the Colombian conflict—a prolonged conflict that has lasted over fifty years, with multiple armed actors, and which has had a devastating effect across the country. Our research team engaged with the NGOs to examine the current state of their archives and the problems and issues they have encountered in collecting and safeguarding them in the particularly complex circumstances of an ongoing armed conflict. First, we provide an overview of the context in which these four NGOs are working and a summary of their main aims and missions. Subsequently, we undertake detailed analysis of the data we gathered, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. We identify the main challenges that each NGO faces and highlight the most salient points that arise regarding the collection, curation, and preservation of nonofficial, grassroots archives. Of particular interest is the emergence of a disparity between the NGOs’ initial evaluations or perceptions of the conditions of their archives and the evaluations that subsequently developed through the research process, highlighting both the saliency of the project and its methodological approach, and the urgent need for support of these archives. At the same time, we draw out notably creative or innovative features and highlight those archival practices that might be best adapted to other such unofficial settings.

Context

Colombia, a country in South America, has suffered one of the longest-running armed conflicts in the world. From 1958 to 2012, there were a total estimated 220,000 deaths, with 60,000 forced disappearances and approximately 7.7 million people displaced by the conflict.² At the time of this writing, the total number of victims of all forms of violence related to the conflict registered in the Colombian government’s Victims Registry stood at just under 9 million (8,944,137).³ In response to this situation, civil society actors have played a vital role with a large number of NGOs emerging in recent decades to represent and fight for recognition of these victims. These NGOs have differing remits according to their particular constituencies, for example, a geographical focus on specific departments or regions within Colombia, or a focus on representing particular sectors of the population, such as ethnic groups, genders, or economic classes.

¹ The research on which this article is based was funded by an AHRC GCRF Follow-On Funding grant, *Archives of Human Rights and Historical Memory*, 2020, ref. AH/T007885/1. The contact email for the grant team is: mvr@liv-erpool.ac.uk

² Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *¡Basta ya! Colombia*; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Hasta encontrarlos*, 14; UNHCR, “Colombia.”

³ Gobierno de Colombia, Red Nacional de Información, *Unidad de Víctimas*. These figures may well be underestimates: according to a recent 2019 policy paper, methodological differences in data collection make it hard to estimate the exact numbers of victims. For instance, “Numbers reported by CODHES, the largest civil society organisation working on forced displacement, nearly double those registered by the government.” Sánchez, Rudling, and Moffett, “Reparations in Colombia.” Indeed, a relatively early study by Ana María Ibáñez and Andrea Velásquez in 2008 revealed how the Colombian government’s demand-driven approach through the Sistema Único de Registro (SUR) works to “exclude particular groups of the displaced population” and led to underreporting of over 30 percent. Ibáñez and Velásquez, “El proceso de identificación de víctimas de los conflictos civiles,” 1.

Crucial to understanding the role of archival practices in the NGOs we discuss is to situate them within the broader peace process being implemented by the Colombian government, and to appreciate the role of symbolic reparations within this process. Therefore, such NGO practices, we argue, must be viewed in the context of Colombia's transitional justice, a notion that has, as Sandra Milena Rios Oyola notes, "expanded from a view on legal and institutional mechanisms that deal with criminal pasts . . . to include broader questions on alternative forms of remembering, reconciling and dealing with transition and new forms of conflict."⁴ Transitional justice, usually taken to refer to the ways in which countries that have emerged from a period of conflict, dictatorship, or repression implement a platform of legal measures to ensure accountability and redress for victims, has thus particular manifestations in Colombia, where issues of representation, remembering, and memory are encompassed in the country's understanding of this type of justice.

Colombia's transitional justice mechanisms are widely recognized as some of the most ambitious and wide-ranging worldwide and include collective and symbolic reparations.⁵ Law 1448 of 2011, commonly known as the Victims and Land Restitution Law, enshrines the rights of victims to damages, to the restitution of prior living conditions, to a range of services, and to special protections in legal proceedings. Importantly, the law also includes mechanisms and procedures for symbolic reparations, at a time when these are increasingly recognized as having as much importance as material reparations in transitional contexts, due to their potential to promote redress, foster solidarity, reweave a community's social fabric, and restore the dignity of victims and survivors.

Article 141 of Law 1448 spells out the notion of symbolic reparations in the following way: "Symbolic reparation is understood as any action undertaken for the benefit of victims or the general community that aims to ensure the preservation of historical memory, non-repetition of victimizing events, public acknowledgment of the facts of events, public requests for forgiveness, and recovery of the dignity of victims."⁶ Symbolic reparation for human rights abuses therefore includes the acts of listening to victims, recording testimonies, and preserving archives of this material.

Within this specific context, archives of human rights and historical memory play a particularly important role as instruments for recording testimony of the conflict. Indeed, archives are formally recognized in Colombia as one of the mechanisms for transitional justice, to guarantee victims receive truth, justice, full reparation, and non-repetition. Article 144 also states explicitly the need for a human rights archive at the national level:

Within six (6) months of the passing of this law, the [National] Centre for Historical Memory [CNMH] will design, create, and implement a Program of Human Rights and Historical Memory, whose principal functions will be to house, preserve, and protect materials that it has collected, or that have been voluntarily submitted to it by individuals or formal organizations, which refer to or document any and all issues related to the violations considered in Article 3 of this law, as well as state responses to such violations.⁷

⁴ Rios Oyola, *Religion, Social Memory and Conflict*, 3.

⁵ deWaardt and Weber, "Beyond Victims' Mere Presence," 215.

⁶ Congreso de la República de Colombia. *Law 1448*, 47.

⁷ All translations are by the authors.

In this same law, the subsequent article (145) proposes a series of “actions in relation to historical memory,” among which it includes “the act of compiling an archive of original or verified copies of documents regarding all victimizing acts to which this present law refers.”⁸ The CNMH, established by this law, was then tasked with the creation of such a national archive. In its work, the CNMH also developed a “Public Policy on Archives of Human Rights, Historical Memory and Armed Conflict,” which defined archives as essential “to reach truth, peace, and consolidation of democracy.”⁹ This policy set down a series of recommendations for norms and measures to ensure the protection, formation, appropriation, and societal use of archives of this nature, thus contributing to guarantees of the rights of truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition.

All of the above indicates that archives of human rights and historical memory in Colombia are not simply repositories for saving data but constitute an integral part of transitional justice as envisaged in that country. In saying this, we do not mean to suggest there is such a thing as a “neutral” archive; as Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook remind us, archives are social constructs and are not “passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.” Building on Maurice Halbwachs, Schwartz and Cook argue that “remembering (or re-creating) the past through historical research in archival records is not simply ‘the retrieval of stored information, but the putting together of a claim about past states of affairs by means of a framework of shared cultural understanding.’” They argue,

Archives have always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations. They are a product of society’s need for information, and the abundance and circulation of documents reflects the importance placed on information in society. They are the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies.¹⁰

Therefore, the NGO archives discussed in this article should be understood in relation to Schwartz and Cook’s observations, and within the broader national context of symbolic reparations in Colombia. That said, we do not wish to imply that the work of these four NGOs is a state-sponsored activity; rather, we approach their work as instances of archive-making “from below,” taking up Catalina Díaz’s phrase in which she described transitional justice in terms of “the ‘from below’ actors—meaning peasant, indigenous, African-Colombian and urban peripheral organised groups; community-based organisations and their networks; grassroots initiatives; victim’s organisations; local non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and trade-unions.”¹¹ Such “from below” actors have also been discussed by Rios Oyola regarding religion and social memory, as providing “a

⁸ Decree 103/2015, article 50, of Colombia, the Regulatory Decree of Law 1712/2014, defines human rights archives in the following way: “Human rights archives refer to documents which, in the widest sense, relate to violations and infringements of International Human Rights Law.” Decreto 103 de 2015 Nivel Nacional, alcaldiabogota.gov.co.

⁹ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Política Pública de Archivos de Derechos Humanos*.

¹⁰ Schwartz and Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power,” 3, 13.

¹¹ Díaz, “Challenging Impunity from Below,” 190.

perspective ‘from below’ in terms of transitional justice that helps to correct the deficit in terms of the civil society’s needs of accountability, reparation and justice.”¹²

Thus our focus here is on archival practices by four “from below” actors. However, in referring to these NGOs as from below, we do not mean to suggest that they operate in a sociopolitical vacuum or entirely in opposition to state-sponsored initiatives. Indeed, we echo the observations of those scholars who have argued that strict top-down/bottom-up dichotomies can often obscure the agency of grassroots actors in designing and implementing public policy, and the role of state actors in responding to community-led initiatives. As Sabine Marschall reminds us in relation to the recuperation of vernacular memory in South Africa, “The recovery and official recognition of vernacular popular memory validates the experiences and identities of the previously marginalised,” but “it cannot be taken for granted that counter-memory is automatically liberation, or that such counter-memory should have legitimacy per se.”¹³ Accordingly, we discuss memory actors from below with these caveats in mind. We are fully aware that there are multiple factors that contribute to the creation of archives in Colombia in the current context, and we do not mean to suggest that the actions of every NGO are, of necessity, resistant or oppositional. What we do suggest, however, is that these four NGOs are working to carve out spaces for expressions of the experiences of the victims they represent, and that their archives form an important tool for this vital work.

We are also informed by the findings of a recent brief article by Marta Lucía Giraldo that affirms the crucial role archives play in shaping the memory and testimony of a society, most especially one so ravaged by violence, where victims often lack the necessary documentation to establish their rights.¹⁴ Giraldo reviews recent attempts at creating registries of victims and archives of human rights in Colombia, including the book *Recordar en conflicto: Iniciativas no oficiales de memoria en Colombia* (Remembering in Conflict: Unofficial Initiatives on Memory in Colombia), published by the International Centre for Transitional Justice, and the Colombia Nunca Más (Colombia Never Again) project. Giraldo’s findings highlight the urgent need for an inventory of archives of human rights, currently dispersed across government departments, organizations representing victims and their families, investigative commissions, legal tribunals, and specialist collections on particular individuals or themes. Indeed, we too as a research team struggled to identify a comprehensive register or tally of NGOs supporting victims, and we echo Giraldo’s appeal for urgency in the work of organizing archives and gathering material, especially the fleeting testimonies of victims, that have proven so fundamental to human rights researchers.

Informed by these theoretical underpinnings, which posit archives as active sites in which power is negotiated, and by the contextual factors related to archives in Colombia in the current context of transitional justice, and conscious of the urgent need for further research on human rights archives as outlined by Giraldo, our project investigates four NGOs that have created their own archives of the Colombian conflict. As we analyze below, these archives have distinct features and differ from a standard understanding of archives, that is, as fixed repositories housed by the state.

¹² Rios Oyola, *Religion, Social Memory and Conflict*, 22.

¹³ Marschall, “Commemorating the ‘Trojan Horse’ Massacre in Cape Town,” 141.

¹⁴ Giraldo, “Registro de la memoria colectiva del conflicto armado en Colombia.”

Each of the four NGOs work in the areas of human rights, historical memory, and testimonies and memories of conflict in Colombia in relation to different intersectionalities and populations: the Organización Femenina Popular (OFP), or Popular Women's Organization, is a grassroots body set up by predominantly working-class women of Afro-Colombian descent; the Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales (Red MVP), or Network of Women Victims and Professionals, represents mainly (although not exclusively) middle-class women; the Fundación Guagua (hereafter Guagua) works with predominantly rural, *campesina* (peasant) women; while Corporación Zoscua (hereafter Zoscua) represents the experience of urban and rural (both male and female) victims in a specific department of Colombia (Boyacá).

The oldest and most established of these four NGOs, the OFP, was founded in 1972 in the department of Santander. It describes its mission as increasing the participation and empowerment of women in Colombia through full enjoyment of their comprehensive human rights. The OFP declared that it would create a vast network of self-organizing groups that would sustain themselves through strong interpersonal ties binding them to one another, to their neighborhoods, and to their communities. Anabel Garrido Ortolá describes it as one of the main organizations within Colombia to “generate resistance to hegemony, and seek an end to violence and the construction of peace free from oppression, from a feminist perspective.”¹⁵ The OFP takes a markedly feminist stance in its approach to peace and conflict resolution. Indeed, María Carolina Alfonso Gil notes that in the OFP, “disputes over physical spaces, symbolic meanings, and the struggle not to be displaced from their land and to remain in their territories, intersect with their identity as women against war, and a peace-building project that links memory and justice with the exercise and enforceability of rights, the appropriation of public spaces, and a politicization of issues and spaces otherwise regarded as private.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, the most recent of the four NGOs is the Red MVP, established in 2012. This network or umbrella organization brings together groups defending women's human rights, and works with women, girls, boys, adolescents, and men who are victims of sexual violence in the context of Colombia's armed conflict and sociopolitical violence. In addition, Red MVP provides emotional, legal, and political support to victims, including psychosocial support when dealing with the Colombian authorities, in order to secure victims their rights before the law and access to justice. In this way, it builds popular capacity for the pursuit of reparations, personal and collective empowerment, and no repetition of violence. As one of the research participants explained in an interview with us,

We started working in schools, and by 2016 were a formal network and really growing; now we are present in nine regions of Colombia and have seventeen regional coordinators. We work on issues such as empowerment, access to justice, political participation at national and international level; we are part of SEMA, which is a global network we set up in June 2017 with Dr. Denis [Mukwege], we now include twenty-one countries, all victims of sexual violence; right now what we are working

¹⁵ Garrido Ortolá, “Narrativas de resistencia,” 116.

¹⁶ Alfonso Gil, “Barrancabermeja,” 87.

hard on is reparations, we are working on that as an organization in alliance with the Unit for Investigations and Accusations.¹⁷

Also defending the human rights of some of the most vulnerable people and communities is the third NGO, Guagua. Since its beginnings in 2000, it has focused in particular on victims of crimes committed by the state in the department of Valle del Cauca and the Colombian southwest. Guagua has compiled an important archive of documents and material related to the Colombian social and armed conflict, which today is housed at its own center and museum, the Galería de la Memoria Tiberio Fernández Mafla, housing permanent and traveling exhibitions of historical memory.

Taking another approach, Zoscua, in the department of Boyacá, has assumed the mission of constructing historical memory in the public domain. Since 2007, Zoscua has focused on public visibility and conscious acts of resistance to the misrepresentation of victims or abandonment of their memory. Members of Zoscua practice this vision by carrying out a series of direct actions and activities that take place within public spaces, such as city streets, squares, and parks. The group sees the undertaking of creative, artistic, and participatory memory practices as an integral part of its representation of victims, stating that it aims to “generate societal action in defense of life, based on an active, nonviolent approach, using plastic and visual arts, theater, and other artistic expressions.”¹⁸ These include the construction of a permanent memory wall-monument, “Monument for Memory, Dignity, and Life,” in the capital city of the department in 2014, as well as of a variety of traveling exhibitions and interventions, involving different artistic and cultural components, including dance, performance, photographs, and posters, all showcased in various towns and cities across the department. Zoscua has thus developed a series of mechanisms for truth-telling and the construction of historical memory, and for the pursuit of justice, reconciliation, and full reparations for victims, through these collective artistic, cultural, and activist actions.

Methodology

To research the condition and use of the archives held by these four NGOs, our study involved an initial project design phase, which incorporated question formation and ethics review, followed by

¹⁷ Here we can see inconsistencies between official or written narratives of the organization’s history and the oral testimony of its representatives in interviews, a not unfamiliar occurrence in relation to popular organizations that have grown organically or, as in the case of Red MVP, are constituted as a network or umbrella to connect a wide range of groups that organize according to their locality or thematic purpose. Certainly the Red MVP existed before 2016, as it took part in delegations that participated in the design of Law 1719, passed in 2014, to guarantee women’s access to justice.

SEMA, the Global Network of Victims and Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence, empowers survivors to “draw global attention to the continued use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and call for the changes needed to end the violence and achieve justice.” <https://www.semanetwork.org/the-sema-global-network/>.

Nobel Peace Laureate Dr. Denis Mukwege, a gynecologist from Eastern Congo and specialist in the treatment of wartime sexual violence. His NGO campaigns against rape as a weapon of war and promotes access to a holistic model of medical care that integrates psychosocial, legal, and socioeconomic support. <https://www.semanetwork.org/the-dr-denis-mukwege-foundation/>.

The *Unidad de Investigación y Acusación* was set up as part of the peace process for investigating and prosecuting individuals and collectives who failed to reveal the full truth of their crimes or to accept responsibility before the Colombian Truth Commission.

¹⁸ Corporación Zoscua, “Proyecto Muro de la Memoria,” 2.

data gathering, data analysis, and write-up. During the data gathering stage, we held in-depth interviews with each NGO, lasting approximately two hours, which took the form of semi-structured conversations. Questions were shared with the NGOs in advance, a measure that enabled them to reflect, consult, prepare responses, and collect information where necessary. In terms of research procedure, this step is important in as far as it allows interviewees to come to meetings prepared; in terms of research ethics, it enhances transparency and accountability in such a way that participants feel better informed about the nature of the process to which they are consenting. More importantly, it goes some way toward reducing the inevitable anxieties that interviewees can feel when opening up their archives and their NGOs to an outside body. The focus on putting research study participants at their ease is therefore not merely a nicety of etiquette but rather an integral characteristic of the team's methodological and ethical approach and formed part of our ethos as a project, which is to foster supportive relationships with these organizations.

Our method and approach are especially significant given that these archives relate to highly sensitive, emotional material, conserved and curated within communities that have experienced trauma, by persons who have assumed a heavy burden of responsibility, often at considerable personal sacrifice or risk. Borrowing from our cross-disciplinary backgrounds and research with marginalized cultural and political communities, we conceptualize grassroots human rights archives in terms of a psychosocial and political subculture; hence, we seek “culturally sensitive pedagogies of research methods,” which, on the one hand, are highly receptive to context and to the needs already identified by NGOs, and on the other hand, function to raise consciousness, through engagement with research, of issues in archival practice that hitherto they may not have been able to identify. As such, the need for rapport, trust, and transparency on both sides is heightened.¹⁹

On this note, the semi-structured interview approach we chose proved fruitful: by sharing in advance and working to a standard set of questions with all four NGOs, it allowed us both the aforementioned transparency and a means to ensure, as Juliette C. Young and colleagues recommend, that comparisons could be made and data quality maintained.²⁰ Furthermore, the fact that interviews were semi-structured allowed for follow-up questions, the opportunity to press interviewees on particular points if a relevant line of enquiry emerged, or even for the interviewee to reorient the discussion. As Young and her coauthors note, this flexibility is important when investigating complex issues. The intricate, sensitive, personal nature of the material in question, and the social and historical importance of the enterprises in which the NGOs are engaged—documenting human rights abuses and forms of resistance—were of the utmost importance in shaping our method, which aims to avoid overly defining or delimiting the parameters of discussion. Rather, these can emerge from the persons who assume responsibility for the preservation and use of such high-stakes historic documents.

For the same reasons, instead of subjecting the NGOs to a barrage of closed questioning (often constructed from researchers' assumptions), we engaged substantially with qualitative methods such as open-ended questioning and a tolerance for apparent “divergences” or off-topic responses and conversations. A more conversational style can allow for an approach where social relations are a little closer to interaction than transaction.²¹ It approximates more naturalistic interactions

¹⁹ Flores Farfán and Holzscheiter, “The Power of Discourse and the Discourse of Power.”

²⁰ Young et al., “A Methodological Guide to Using and Reporting on Interviews in Conservation Science Research.”

²¹ Garner and Sercombe, “Research as Social Relations.”

and minimizes the interrogative effects of closed questioning that can disempower the informant. While this approach proved burdensome in terms of designing a feasible mechanism for analysis and systematization of the wealth of unscripted data, it was undoubtedly determinant in securing for us information that otherwise would not have emerged. In other words, this flexibility helped to deliver a more culturally appropriate research environment, allowing interviewees greater opportunity to choose how and what to communicate, and thus for their knowledge and expertise to emerge. Indeed, this approach allowed the research team to tease out some important complexities.

Having established the main aims and approach of the research, the team's information scientist and local impact researcher developed a profiling tool in order to systematically record characteristics, current use, and condition of these four quite diverse NGO archives. This profiling tool was designed around the following areas of enquiry: (1) Identity of the organization; history and context of the NGO; (2) Location and environmental characteristics of the archive; (3) Societal use of the archives; digitization plans. Interviews were undertaken by the research team in the cities where each NGO is located: Cali (Guagua), Barrancabermeja (OFP), Tunja (Zoscua), and Bogotá (Red de MVP). For three of the four NGOs, a face-to-face visit was undertaken; in the case of the fourth NGO, a virtual visit by videoconference had to be conducted, due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic.²² A process of informed consent preceded each interview, with a participant information sheet and consent form (in Spanish), so that participants were fully informed of the purpose of the research project, what their participation would involve, and how such data would be used and then stored. We provide anonymity for participants, such that we cite them as representatives of their respective NGOs but not by name.

The research team took detailed photographic documentation of the state of the archives, comprising approximately twenty color photographs of the precise locations, spaces, and containers in which archival material is housed. This observation and visual documentation of the physical spaces in which the material is kept has made for a richer analysis, enabling the research team to better understand the issues that arise from the physical spaces available, as much as from the archival materials themselves.

During the interviews, the NGOs' staff described the archival practices they undertake in their day-to-day working, the types of documents they house, how these are cataloged, and what tools or methods are used to conserve them. The interviews and site visits also allowed the research team to investigate the physical characteristics of the collection, that is, the spaces they occupy, the sizes of different components, and the environmental risks to which the structures could be subject. In addition, these visits and interviews allowed the research team to evaluate the safety of the archives, covering topics such as environmental and biological, emergency plans, issues of

²² Visits to the archives of Guagua, the OFP, and Zoscua were undertaken in February and early March 2020. Subsequently, the university at which the principal investigator of this project is employed issued a directive in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to the effect that all face-to-face contact with human participants for the purpose of research should be halted on Friday, March 20, 2020, until further notice, and that data collection methods should be altered to avoid face-to-face contact with human participants. In line with this directive, the fourth and final visit to the archives of the Red MVP was replaced by a virtual visit, with the participant showing the interviewer around the physical site of the archives by video call and interviews conducted by teleconferencing. In so doing, the research team ensured that no participant needed to break quarantine (e.g., to leave their usual residence) or have physical contact with any other participant or person not resident in their own household or to place themselves within two meters of any other individual.

digitization and backups, as well as the safety of those working with the archives in the NGO. Finally, the interviews covered the current societal use of the archives, not only in relation to the internal processes of the organization but in terms of their instrumentalization in external, public, visible social processes. This includes the types of user accessing the materials and types of activities being undertaken with local communities based on these archives.

All information gathered was transcribed and processed into a matrix from which data could be extracted and compiled into a report that synthesizes the content. This report provides the necessary input for analysis and decision-making with regards to the design of a customized archival toolkit, which will be one of the next steps of this research project. Although outside the scope of this article, which focuses on the research process and its findings, it is worth noting that the research process reported here is just one part of a much longer, multiphase project that will result in the development of a purpose-built toolkit for the preservation of archives based on the findings and the needs of these NGOs. Called “ArchiCom: Practical Solutions for Community Archives of Human Rights,” the kit will consist of a set of practical recommendations and guides, as well as materials and products for the preservation of community archives.

The main conclusions of the report cover the following three areas: identity, history, and context of the NGOs; location, space, and environmental conditions of the archives; and societal use and digitization of the archives.

Identity, History, and Context

In terms of identity, history, and context, all four NGOs work on issues of public visibility and representation of Colombia’s armed conflict, reparations for victims, the construction of historical memory, the struggle for human rights, and the rights of women. As a group, the main thematic content of their archives relates to crimes against humanity (including extra-judicial executions, torture, and forced disappearances), peace processes enacted and led by women, victims’ access to justice, struggles over land, and issues of visibility and public representation of local communities.

It is important to note that, while having several similarities in terms of their focus on victims, human rights, and historical memory, the four NGOs each have their own specific identities and particularities. For example, Zoscua affirms that they particularly focus on three victimizing events:

With our archives [at Corporación Zoscua] we are always referring to three victimizing events: extra-judicial executions, forced disappearances, and murder.

Meanwhile, a particular characteristic of the OFP is their centering around feminism; they foreground peace processes mobilized by women. In turn, this strongly influences the content of the archival material that they hold:

Peace Processes mobilized and led by women, this is the particular content that the OFP has. . . . The Casa de la Memoria (Museum of Memory) is an archive of historical memory of how women have carried out peace processes in the region.²³

Moreover, the OFP do not regard feminism or peace processes in isolation; rather, their stance links these to wider issues of structural inequalities. For this reason, the OFP archives also cover related socioeconomic topics, including financial autonomy and food security:

Other important areas of work that you can see documented in the archive and that have been emblematic of the organization are the issues of economic independence and food sovereignty; maybe in the beginning the archive gathered up more material to do with those issues, because that's what the struggle was about then; it was about ordinary people, women, in working-class neighborhoods.

As for Guagua, they highlight the following issues within their particular archives:

The issues you'll find there relate to the struggle against impunity, the accompaniment of communities, and to popular empowerment in terms of human rights, education, research, and promotion of human rights.²⁴

Thus, for Guagua, as well as fighting against impunity for past atrocities, a particular concern is the strengthening of human rights in the present day, which goes hand in hand with education.

Finally, the Red MVP pays particular attention to women victims and sexual violence:

[We pursue] a guarantee to victims of sexual violence that has taken place during the Colombian armed conflict, the right to justice, to reparations, to no-repetition, to empowerment, and to psychosocial assistance.

Location, Space, and Environmental Conditions

Regarding the location, space, and conditions of the archives, in general terms all four NGOs have clearly achieved a great deal in compiling and housing these human rights archives. Archives comprise documents, photographs, books, press cuttings, records, cassettes, and VHS tapes, as well as objects collected or produced by the organizations, such as veils, textiles, banners, symbolic objects, and clothing. The NGOs have strived to achieve a basic cataloging of resources, based on key data such as year, theme, place, and category of victimizing event.

However, there are serious issues that need to be addressed urgently. In some cases, a lack of physical space means archives cannot be housed together by the NGO and have become fragmented. For example, Zoscua's files already fill the shelving of a six-by-four-meter storeroom, but

²³ The Casa de la Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres (Museum of Women's Human Rights and Historical Memory) was opened by the OFP in July 2019.

²⁴ "Accompaniment" may mean physical accompaniment for a community under threat, or political or social accompaniment and solidarity. It thus conveys "support for" as well as the physical accompaniment that the term in English provides.

the archive keeps growing. Similarly, Guagua already has a line of fifteen boxes of archives stretching eighteen meters. Meanwhile, at the Red MVP, some of its most important archival documents are currently stored in thick plastic bags:

Copies of the legal complaints are kept in plastic bags, they are classified according to dates; only authorized personnel can access the [internal] information systems.

This investigation of this specific issue—the location and environmental conditions in which the archives are housed—is one where our methodological approach of semi-structured interviews bore particular fruit. In advance of the interviews, the research team conducted some closed questioning, using a simple scale on which the NGOs recorded their initial self-assessments of the conditions of their archives. Figure 1 shows the scores that each NGO chose to indicate their self-assessments regarding categories we identified, namely, the archives’ construction, the location and environmental conditions in which they are housed, emergency plans in place for their protection, the existence of backup files, and the general security of their conditions.

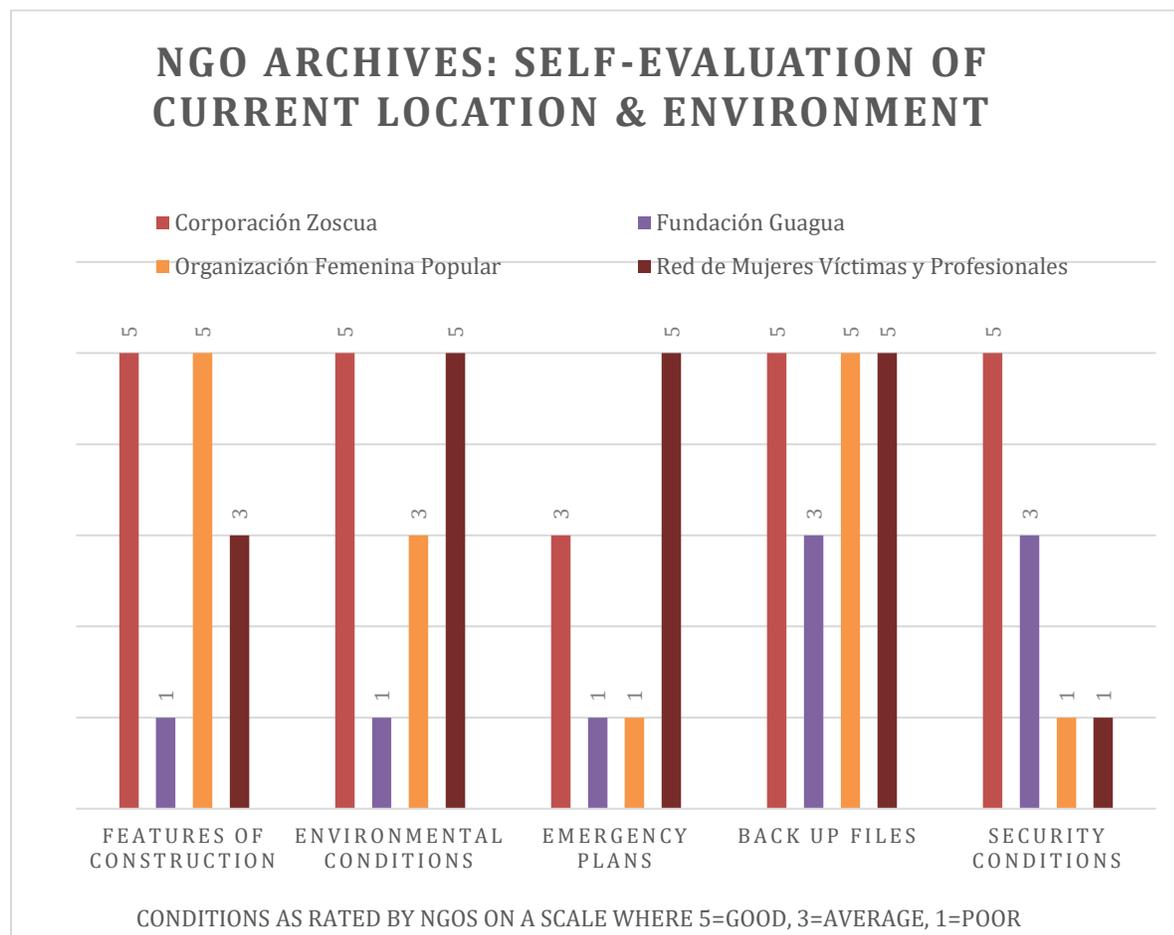


Figure 1. NGO’s initial self-assessments

Figure 1 shows that most of the NGOs rated their archives very favorably in relation to most of the criteria. For example, two NGOs gave the highest score possible (5) for features of construction; similarly, two NGOs gave the highest score possible for environmental conditions. However, during the more detailed discussions that arose between the research team and the NGOs through the semi-structured interviews and field visits, members of the NGOs identified several major issues of concern, especially regarding the construction of the archives and the environmental conditions in which they are housed.

Similarly, there is disparity between the NGOs' initial scores in relation to emergency plans and the more detailed self-assessments that emerged in the semi-structured interviews. As a result, in contradiction to the numerical scores given in figure 1, none of the organizations does in fact have a clear or reliable procedure in case of emergencies (e.g., flood or fire). And, indeed, the NGOs were anxious to raise their concerns about this in discussions and highlight it as an area that they wish to develop more.

In this way, our semi-structured approach allowed the NGOs to pick up on prompts set up by the original questions but to explore further, which led to much fuller discussion. By creating space and opportunity in the research process for reflection, the interviewees were able to revisit topics and also review their initial thoughts, voice their own priorities and concerns, and take a constructively critical view of their own situations, thereby becoming participants in a process of consciousness-raising dialogue for both parties. Thus, a much richer set of data was generated.

In addition, the actual format of some of the archival material was noted as causing concern, since another risk, that of technical obsolescence, emerged in the discussions, particularly relating to cassette tape formats and CD-ROMs. The NGOs are anxious to update archives and thereby facilitate wider access and use. That said, for the OFP, a more immediate concern is the physical deterioration of its archive. Neither the required access to resources nor to decision-making are necessarily in the hands of the actual archivists, with implications for the protection of archives and the physical conditions in which they are held. As staff of the OFP reported,

Before, our organization always kept its archives in the other headquarters. . . . It was a bigger space and it had the right conditions; [from] 2013 our center here was restructured to create a Museum of Memory. In that process things did not go as they should, the archives really suffered. [During building work] the archives were not moved out, they were stacked on shelves. . . . The actual structure of the building, the housing for the archives, and the archives themselves were damaged; some things got wet, some things were ruined and could not be saved, however much we tried.

The OFP encountered a particular challenge arising from too many activities occurring in close proximity to their archival holdings. Zoscua, meanwhile, faced challenges as a result of the fragmentation and dispersal of their archives among different members of the organization. Their archive—which comprises photos, documents, books, banners, textiles, crosses, and equipment—is currently split between four different people:

They are in different places, [we are] always doing our best to avoid any harm coming to them.

Asked whether this dispersal of the archive is considered a strength or a weakness, members of Zoscua replied,

It's a weakness, but we can't keep it together because there isn't enough space; the ideal thing would be to have a storeroom. But on the other hand, the fact that the archive is dispersed also means that each caretaker has to take an interest and take responsibility for the archive, so then that becomes a strength.

As such, we see the additional pressures that environmental conditions place on NGO archivists.

Societal Use and Digitization

Within the constraints of limited resources, the NGOs have sought where possible to make digital copies of archived materials, although this by no means extends to the majority of documents. Staff voiced serious concerns over security, given the highly sensitive nature of the documents, and the physical spaces in which they are housed, exposing them to risks of loss or theft. It is also worth remembering that persons involved in curating the archives can become the target of threats and intimidation from outside the NGOs.

As seen earlier in figure 1 and in the text and photographs 1–4 below, environmental conditions are of particular concern at Guagua and the OFP. Heat, dust, insects, leaks, drips, and poor ventilation threaten archives in both the short and long term. Despite the best efforts of the NGOs, who carried out deep-cleaning and fumigation of the areas where archives are stored, a lack of specialist resources and personnel for such tasks means these efforts are not sustainable. The NGOs themselves highlight a need for training to be delivered (e.g., via freely accessible videos on YouTube), for periodic supervision, for regular cleaning, and for a firm understanding of and commitment to archiving processes by individual members of the NGOs.

The interview with staff of the OFP highlights how damp, heat, and lack of ventilation are key issues currently affecting their archives; in turn, these issues have influenced their plans for how to preserve the archive:

[Our problems are] humidity, heat, no ventilation, no sunlight—there is a space right upstairs in the Museum of Memory where we were hoping we could put the archives, but we haven't been able to, because of a leak, we haven't been able to sort it out.

Photograph 1 illustrates some of the problems faced by OFP.



Photograph 1. Organización Femenina Popular—structural damage in the space where the human rights archive is housed

Meanwhile, Guagua has problems with storage and available space for their materials. For example, documents are stored primarily in reused boxes of uneven sizes and capacities that were originally designed for other purposes (photograph 2). This means the cardboard is not acid-free, which can have harmful repercussions in the long term.



Photograph 2. Fundación Guagua—Storage of archives

In addition, lack of available shelving means some boxes are placed directly on top of one another. In time, the integrity of the lower boxes degrades, as the boxes above start to crush those below. This can be seen in photographs 2 and 3.



Photograph 3. Fundación Guagua—Bookshelves

That said, where space and resources allow, Guagua successfully stores documents in conditions that make them accessible to a wider public for reference and instrumentalization.



Photograph 4. Fundación Guagua—Storage of archives

In terms of storage, Zoscua explain how they reuse second-hand materials, such as rice sacks and pieces of canvas sacks, to preserve their archival materials:

Many photos are kept in sturdy bags, some in rice sacks, or canvas sacks, tied up tight. They are kept in a dry place, maybe ten or twenty photos in each depending, because there are so many, maybe seven hundred in all.

In this way, we learn how organizations make use of the materials they have to hand and adapt whatever available resources they have to the needs of their archives. Such nonstandard strategies

as employed by Zoscua can be seen as an example of innovation and resilience within the constraints in which they are working. However, even with such care, problems arise over the long term. As a member of Zoscua states,

There are fifty [sacks] which are going to be replaced. . . . They would be tucked away in whatever gaps they could find, among the banners, and they would cover them with a black shroud, but that made them difficult to transport around because they were heavier, and those old photos, they were much bigger back then, now they have faded and come apart. Also you have big tarps here with all the candles, banners, crosses (donated by an artist) all in cardboard boxes.

Any document is susceptible to risk when taken out of its storage, put on display, moved from the installations where it is housed, or subject to any other contact or handling. However, the oldest documents in the NGOs' archives are especially vulnerable to inappropriate handling. In relation to their "María Cano" Archive, named after the poet, author, and political leader María Cano (1887–1967), the staff of the OFP observe,

There are so many things there, and the oldest material is most at risk, because after so many years, its age, the humidity, it's so difficult to handle them, we hardly dare touch them.

Some of the NGOs have made plans for looking after and preserving their archives but lack the necessary time, resources, and specialist knowledge. For example, a person at the OFP commented,

Every year we clean them with alcohol; but really and truly, this is not our strongest area, because it is one of the areas of our activity [cultural, archiving] that we have not been able to keep up with. I think some years ago some people came to help us put things in order and take care of them, but that's not regular practice.

We are very aware of the importance of the archive, the issue is that we don't have the resources in place for them. There is no one who is dedicating themselves 100 percent to looking after them, and we haven't had the right training either.

The organizations make use of their archives internally to document cases occurring in their communities and to keep a record of the activities the NGOs undertake. And they do allow public access to the archives, mainly requested by students and researchers. Generally speaking, these archives are technically open to the public for consultation, but since the information in all of them is confidential and classified, consultations are not freely and openly offered; instead, depending on demand and the purposes of the consultation, access to the material is granted or refused on an individual basis.

In the case of all the NGOs in our study, information within their archives cannot be anonymized since the identity of the individual is often of crucial importance. The NGOs have permission from the families of victims to include their names and details—they see it as a means of making victims and the facts of events more visible. But for this reason, external visitors must request permission

to access the archives, in order to protect the identities of individuals whose information is stored in the archives.

The NGOs also undertake periodic exhibitions of their materials by means of traveling exhibitions, displays, and symbolic acts. The social, public use of archives in shows and other cultural and artistic events is of particular importance to these NGOs. Staff at Zoscua highlighted both the importance and difficulties of using archives in public-facing exhibitions, commenting on their plans to create a “memory route,” which would involve exhibitions, monuments, or installations in various localities around the department of Boyacá:

Yes, usually we do that [traveling exhibitions] every couple of months, but the cost of moving the displays is very high. People are thinking about creating a “memory route” in Boyacá.

The NGOs hope the planned “ArchiCom” suite of tools, resources, and training can also facilitate the type of community actions in which they engage. An interviewee at the OFP noted,

[Our hope is that] ArchiCom tools can in some way contribute to the same process as does the Casa de la Memoria. We currently have a project to put these issues on the public agenda. We ourselves have designed a “Memory Walk” in the public space. It should be acknowledged—in Barranca there’s no museum, in the whole region there’s no museum, never mind one focused on gender and memory. . . . We’re thinking about how we can put our memory archive to work with the public, so that people can get to know what a memory archive actually is, can actually touch it; if young people are involved, maybe doing a tour around schools, we want to reach out to [young people] through the Museum of Memory, maybe they can go round it and then we can get involved with them. . . . Bearing in mind that these memory archives are not just paper and documents, but there are so many things that belong in a memory archive, such as banners, sashes, photos, and if we are talking about black women, then we should include items they use in their hair, items for their hair that form part of the memories they hold.

In contrast to the problems of storage staff at OFP voiced, they have been highly successful at developing exhibition space, as seen in photograph 5 below, in the aforementioned Casa de la Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, showcasing many of the OFP’s archival materials.



Photograph 5. Organización Femenina Popular—Display of archive

Conclusions

As seen from the analysis above, grassroots organizations working on human rights and victims in Colombia have developed their own archives with particular characteristics, responding to the specific identities and needs of these organizations. These archives present the NGOs with a set of specific challenges, due both to their nature and to the conditions in which they are held. Archives are often fragmented and may be held by several people, or kept across different locations or spaces within the organization. They are often housed in unofficial spaces or in rooms within a shared venue that were not originally designed for archives. The archives do have some categorization, but this is limited; NGOs tend to classify according to their own system and needs and do not follow a standard classification system, which can thereby make it hard to search them for specific information.

The NGOs whose work is covered in this study, despite the challenges that they face, preserve records using the means at their disposal and undertake a vitally important role in the preservation of material pertaining to human rights and historical memory. It is all the more admirable that they do so in the face of the many obstacles and difficulties posed by the conditions in which they work. The contents of their archives are often vulnerable, both to material deterioration due to environmental factors, such as humidity and heat, and to digital loss, due to inadequate digital backups. Moreover, archives are further at risk due to the continuation of armed conflicts in some areas and threats to local community leaders and curators of these same archives.

As ordinary people in Colombia, victims and survivors of a horrific conflict that endured for decades strive to rebuild their country, construct peace, and prevent repetition of past crimes, communities want to highlight their historic resistance to such violence and injustice, and garner recognition and support for their role as present and future peace-builders. As such, the invaluable archives that ordinary community groups have so determinedly maintained against the odds will serve to break silences, clarify truths, and raise the voices of victims claiming recognition, reparation, and justice.

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