“A criminal accountability perspective alone isn’t enough”: Fernando Travesi of the International Center for Transitional Justice on survivor-centered justice and the long-term commitments required for systemic change.

Lissa Harris
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Lissa Harris: Could you start by introducing yourself and your organization, and talk a bit about the specific problems you’re trying to tackle and how you’re approaching them?

Fernando Travesi: My name is Fernando Travesi. I am the executive director of the International Center for Transitional Justice, or ICTJ. ICTJ was created more than 20 years ago as a human rights organization with the expertise to help societies deal with the legacy and impact of massive human rights violations. When societies face large-scale human rights violations—whether due to war, internal conflict, authoritarian regimes, or political repression—these situations often overwhelm the existing systems and strategies that countries have in place. ICTJ steps in to bring new perspectives, strategies, ideas, and understanding.

ICTJ was established after South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience by some of its members, to create a global organization that supports countries dealing with large-scale human rights violations. Our goal is to help find paths to sustainable peace after conflict or to build inclusive societies after authoritarian rule or repression, based on finding justice for victims and supporting their hopes.

Lissa Harris: Could you talk about your audience or audiences, especially if you're engaged on multiple fronts? Who are you speaking to, and how do you engage them in that conversation?

Fernando Travesi: This is a field that is victim-centered, meaning our main partners are victims of human rights violations. We focus on bringing attention to their experiences, justice needs, and expectations, while supporting them with ideas, technical skills, and strategies. Our main partners are victim groups and civil society organizations working for justice in their countries.

Often, justice systems are not victim-centered, so we aim to emphasize victims' experiences to create or revise justice systems that truly incorporate their needs. To do this, we mobilize extensive support—policymakers, and society at large—to create national recognition of the violations and their impacts. In each country, we work with all stakeholders, as these processes are complex and require broad societal ownership. There are no cookie-cutter solutions; each country needs its own approach. This requires engaging many sectors of society: national governments (when there is political will), policymakers, the private sector, media, academia, human rights groups, civil society, youth, and women's organizations. It's a collective effort to engage society in a meaningful transition.

Lissa Harris: What do you think makes your approach distinct from others working in a similar space? What makes you different, and why do you approach it the way you do?

Fernando Travesi: I think the main difference is in understanding justice for human rights violations beyond just criminal accountability. When you're dealing with large-scale human rights violations, a criminal accountability perspective alone isn't enough. It's not feasible to investigate, prosecute, and imprison every single perpetrator. Even if you could, holding perpetrators accountable—while necessary to show that impunity is not tolerated—would still fall short of delivering full justice to victims.

For example, if someone responsible for killing or disappearing a family member is identified, tried, and convicted, the family may still be left wondering, "Where is my loved one? Why did this happen?" Often, these questions aren't answered in a criminal trial. Victims want to know why these acts were committed, what happened to their family members, and how they can begin to rebuild their lives. They also want to know what changes will be put in place to prevent such violence from happening again. Our approach takes justice to a broader scale, beyond criminal prosecution alone. It's about unfolding multiple processes that ensure victims' rights to truth, reparations, and a commitment from society to prevent future violations.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example you can share that shows the impact of your work?

Fernando Travesi: There's always the question of how to measure impact—whether we assess it on a micro level or a societal level. Experts in monitoring and evaluation use many different systems to gauge this. From a national or societal perspective, there are cases where countries have faced war or massive human rights violations and, by pursuing the maximum level of justice possible, have strengthened democracy, inclusivity, and the rule of law. Examples include countries in South America like Argentina and Chile, South Africa, Germany after World War II, Colombia in part, and The Gambia, a country in West Africa emerging from over 20 years of dictatorship and now building democracy. Of course, if someone from any of these countries were listening, they might say, "But my country still struggles with poverty, corruption, or crime," and that's true. But there is data—numerous databases and empirical evidence—that show that efforts to review, rebuild, and strengthen the social contract based on justice for victims and accountability for perpetrators can improve a country's democracy, inclusiveness, and peace.

It's also important to recognize that building a perfect democracy or achieving total peace is an ongoing process. This work kicks in during critical moments, when a country needs to confront a dark period of violence and decide how to move forward. These processes involve truth-seeking, truth-telling, recommendations, and, where possible, holding perpetrators accountable at the highest levels. This lays a foundation for the country to build a stronger democracy going forward.

Lissa Harris: Is there perhaps a smaller example that illustrates a part of your work, rather than how an entire country might improve its justice system?

Fernando Travesi: Yes, absolutely. I was actually moving from national to micro examples. In every country or community impacted by civil war, there are countless examples of families restoring trust within their communities, finding ways to reconcile with members who were responsible for violence. There are truth-telling, truth-seeking, reparation, and reconciliation efforts at the community or city level that have allowed people to move forward.

I have worked side by side with victims for years and living in war-affected countries — those who have given testimonies to truth-seeking commissions, participated in searches for the disappeared, and engaged in various efforts to regain agency. Many of them say, "This is some form of justice for me. Maybe not all the justice I expected or deserve, but it has restored some of the dignity I lost during the victimization. It has helped me recover a sense of citizenship." Moments like these are incredibly powerful and are at the heart of what we strive for in this field.

Lissa Harris: We learn as much from things that don't work as from things that do. Is there an example of something you tried that didn't work but taught you something valuable?

Fernando Travesi: Definitely. One of the biggest lessons we've learned is the risk of replicating models from one place to another. At our organization, we're very conscious of this and actively work against it because, as we've seen in many countries, copying models that worked elsewhere is often a path to failure. Even if a model could be successfully adapted to a somewhat similar context won't work if it hasn't come from an inclusive process that involves the local community. If people don't actively participate, learn through the process, and reach their own consensus on what's possible, they may not fully invest in or sustain the outcomes. Here, the process is just as critical as the result.

We've learned that rushing toward quick outcomes simply doesn't work. Instead, we prioritize long-term engagement in countries where we can dedicate multiple years to building relationships, mapping stakeholders, listening to people, and co-creating solutions with them. For us, that's the only way forward. For instance, if we're considering work in a particular country but only have resources for six months, we wouldn't commit to a full engagement. We might conduct a very targeted intervention, but real engagement requires two, three, or four years. Without that, you risk creating unrealistic expectations, which leads to frustration and loss of momentum. Long-term investment, not just financially, but in terms of institutional resources, energy, and multi-year planning, is absolutely essential.

Lissa Harris: Could speak a bit about how much shifting cultural norms is part of your work. What specific strategies help shift society's views on the issues you're addressing or change people's behaviors?

Fernando Travesi: Shifting cultural norms is fundamental, especially in war-torn or authoritarian countries where societies often lose their sense of shared humanity. Conflicts lead to polarization, with each side viewing the other as an enemy. Our work in international justice and peace-building aims to reverse this mindset, fostering respect for all and encouraging empathy.

This transformation requires addressing multiple levels—national, institutional, community, and personal. Institutions must be inclusive, democratic, and transparent, while community efforts focus on changing perceptions and behaviors. We foster acknowledgement through strategies like truth-telling, truth-seeking, and reparations to foster acknowledgment and understanding, ensuring widespread participation. Additionally, we leverage art and cultural expressions, such as music and theater, to help communities navigate complex emotions. Art can facilitate

debates and encourage reflection in less polarizing ways than traditional methods, especially when it resonates with local cultures and contexts.

Lissa Harris: What are the biggest barriers to achieving your goals, aside from funding?

Fernando Travesi: Funding is indeed a barrier, but the type is crucial. It needs to be multi-annual and flexible to support long-term processes. Contexts change constantly, and our participatory approach requires this flexibility; we can't pre-determine actions when engaging communities. Even with ample funding, restrictive conditions can lead to decisions that lack community ownership, which is problematic. Another major barrier is the political nature of our work. This involves rebuilding society at various levels, focusing on community commitments and promoting inclusive values. However, this creates vulnerabilities to political changes.

No country emerges from war without polarization, which creates tension between those pursuing justice and those wanting to revert to the status quo. We've seen promising processes collapse due to government changes. For instance, Afghanistan exemplifies how two decades of work for justice can unravel. Every electoral cycle can shift national perspectives, affecting transitional justice processes that strive for inclusive recognition of harms and justice for all victims.

Lissa Harris: What would you say is the role of partnerships and coalitions in your work? What strategies do you use to build and cultivate those relationships on the ground?

Fernando Travesi: Partnerships and coalitions are essential; this is not work we can do alone. Our organization acts as a coalition builder, bringing together different groups, including policymakers and victims. We work on building awareness and capacity while helping these groups collaborate when the moment is right. We often need to partner with organizations that have specific expertise, whether in technology or agriculture. For instance, if we're dealing with land restitution, we might engage those focused on agricultural reform. It's crucial to align with individuals and organizations that share our values, but that doesn't mean only working with like-minded people; we also engage those who may have different perspectives but possess the right knowledge.

On the funding side, building relationships with donors based on partnership rather than just funding is crucial. Our major donors become our partners, which includes not only economic support but also technical collaboration to advance our values. The need for partnerships is increasingly recognized, but it can be challenging in practice. Some organizations are territorial

or competitive, which requires time to demonstrate how we can complement each other. We focus on partnership building at the international, national, and community levels, as these relationships are key entry points for our work.

Lissa Harris: What main insights or teachable lessons from your work could others pursuing justice learn from? What advice would you give them?

Fernando Travesi: There is a clear need to broaden our understanding of justice. The traditional view focuses on legal systems and tribunals, which, while important, is limited in achieving justice for all. Justice should also encompass equity, the prevention of discrimination, reparations, and truth-seeking. The principles of transitional justice can be applied beyond specific conflicts and to broader societal issues.

For example, in recent years, these principles have been used to address the legacy of slavery in the U.S. and historical violations in Africa. The key question is whether there are larger-scale situations of injustice that remain unaddressed, prompting civic and political demands for justice long after the fact. Traditional legal systems often cannot address these issues, as many perpetrators are deceased, or the evidence required for prosecution is unavailable. Instead, we need alternative strategies. This includes truth-seeking and re-examining historical narratives, such as assessing monuments and the stories they convey. Ultimately, the core discussion revolves around what justice truly means and how we can redefine it to encompass broader societal needs.

Lissa Harris: Many working on sexual violence issues have diverse views on justice. Some aim to reform the court system to reduce impunity and support survivors, while others argue it often re-victimizes individuals. What is your vision for a survivor-centered justice system?

Fernando Travesi: You'll have to ask the survivors, as their responses vary widely based on their experiences. For example, someone displaced by war may prioritize stopping the conflict and recovering their homes and livelihoods rather than seeking to jail the individual who dropped the bomb. They want their lives back, not necessarily to identify a perpetrator.

On the other hand, a victim of torture might focus on the individual perpetrator and the reasons behind their actions, wanting to understand the broader context. In cases of sexual and gender-based violence, survivors might emphasize recovery and rebuilding their lives. They may ask, "How do I recover? What does my future look like?" Mental health and well-being are crucial

aspects of justice for them. Ultimately, each survivor's perspective on justice is shaped by their specific violations and needs, highlighting the complexity of justice itself.

Lissa Harris: What does it look like to engage communities, especially when survivors and perpetrators are working together?

Fernando Travesi: It's challenging, particularly in conflicts where violence occurs between neighbors or family members. When they come back together, it requires careful handling. At the micro level, there are inspiring examples of communities successfully navigating this. Central to this process is mental health and psychosocial support, which we increasingly incorporate into our work. Every step of the justice journey should promote mental well-being rather than frustration or humiliation by bureaucratic systems. It's essential that these systems facilitate healing and contribute positively to the justice conversation. Additionally, for communities to reconcile, there must be a collective acknowledgment of the violations that occurred. This acknowledgment is crucial for rebuilding civic relationships, as many instances of violence are often denied or downplayed. A shared understanding of the past can create a common ground for moving forward.

Lissa Harris: What do you think are effective ways in this work to create accountability and transparency for institutions for the higher level movers of these dynamics?

Fernando Travesi: Accountability is essential in our work because institutions often play a complicit or passive role in violations. They may either be directly involved or fail to protect citizens adequately, which must be examined to identify responsible individuals, policies, or systems. Many truth commissions have effectively illustrated the systemic nature of violence, revealing that the issue extends beyond individual actors to the overall system that is failing. It's vital to understand the processes that allow such violations to occur, whether through recruitment, training, or the institutional framework promoting injustice. To create change, we need to review institutional policies and practices thoroughly. For example, we've screened national security and justice officers, finding that performance reviews often lack human rights considerations. Integrating these considerations into institutional assessments is crucial for meaningful reform.

Lissa Harris: I'd like to revisit your point about avoiding the direct application of successful approaches from one context to another. There's pressure to quickly replicate and scale solutions. Can you reflect on that tension?

Fernando Travesi: This pressure often stems from the demand for quick results and outcomes, leading to a tendency to replicate solutions. Another contributing factor, which I hesitate to mention, is the consultancy model. I believe that the way consultancies operate can sometimes undermine the values and objectives of organizations like ours. When we work with a community, we aim to share our knowledge and experiences, helping them understand what has worked in similar contexts. We connect them with people who have faced analogous challenges, allowing the community to derive their own conclusions.

However, over relying on short-term consultancies—that don't complement in the right proportion a long-term, sustained engagement and cooperation with local partners—can result in proposals that don't address root causes of the conflict and in copy-paste solutions. This can lead to superficial solutions that don't genuinely address the specific needs or realities of the community. It's essential to take the time to understand the local culture, challenges, and aspirations. Sustainable change requires a deeper engagement that respects the complexity of each situation rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

I don't blame the consultants; it's a challenging position. However, I believe that engaging mission-driven institutions and investing time in multi-annual approaches is the only way to prevent this replication and ensure more meaningful outcomes.

Lissa Harris: I want to thank you for your time. Is there anything else that we didn't touch on that you think is really important to get into before we wrap up?

Fernando Travesi: The topic of sexual violence in childhood requires systemic change. This spans from individual behavior to education, values, social tolerance, and administration. It's important to recognize that not every organization can address all these levels, but those who work within any of them must be aware of who operates at the higher levels and prioritize building relationships. It's akin to knowing your neighbors if you're on the first floor; you need to understand how to collaborate effectively. This message needs to be consistently acknowledged and embraced.

Lissa Harris: Thank you for being part of this.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter, science writer (MIT '08), and former local news entrepreneur based in upstate New York. She is currently working as a consultant on capacity-building and local solutions-oriented community projects in the rural Catskills.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*