Children & Youth in Transitional Justice

An Internship Experience at the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ)

By Kristen Grennan (MPA ’16)

Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA)

AC4 Fellow, 2015

What is the ICTJ?
The ICTJ is an international non-profit organization specializing in the field of transitional justice.

The ICTJ works to help societies in transition address legacies of massive human rights violations and build civic trust in state institutions as protectors of human rights.

In the aftermath of mass atrocity and repression, the ICTJ assists institutions and civil society groups—the people who are driving and shaping change in their societies—in considering measures to provide truth, accountability, and redress for past abuses.

The ICTJ does this by providing technical expertise and knowledge of relevant comparative experiences in transitional justice from across the globe.

(Source: ICTJ website)

What is Transitional Justice?

Transitional justice refers to the set of judicial and non-judicial measures that have been implemented by different countries in order to reorder the legacies of massive human rights abuses. These measures include criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations programs, and various kinds of institutional reforms.

Transitional justice comprises of four main elements:
1. Criminal Prosecutions
2. Reparations
3. Institutions Reforms
4. Truth Commissions

(Source: ICTJ website)

Why Engage Children and Youth?

Conflict disproportionately affects the most vulnerable persons in society, often, those persons are children. At times, children also play a complex role in violence, such as by being forced to participate in atrocities themselves. Meaningfully engaging children and youth is essential in both recognizing the agency of children and the opportunity for children to be active and important members of society. Furthermore, engaging children in transitional justice today can help to ensure the sustainability of peace and democracy.

Acknowledgments

Special thank you to:
• Professor Zachary Metz, for organizing this amazing internship experience for me and for preparing me for the work I would be doing over the summer and in my future career.
• Vaneque Lalich, Rachel Goodman, and Matta Martineau, for your genuine interest in my thoughts and feedback and for the opportunities you provided me at the ICTJ.
• Professor Graeme Simpson, for your knowledge on transitional justice and your interest in my final paper.
• Meredith Smith, for your serious passion for your work, your assistance in giving me ideas on what to research and write about, and your invaluable career advice.

International Youth Day

Date: August 12, 2015

Theme: Youth Civic Engagement

What: International Youth Day is a UN-recognized holiday to call attention to the role youth play in society, and in 2015 looked specifically at the importance of youth civic engagement.

My Role: I created a social media pack for the ICTJ communications team, including sample tweets, Facebook posts, posters, and more. Additionally, I attended the International Youth Day event at the UN, sharing live tweets and reporting to the organization from the event.

Release of the ICTJ Kenya Truth Commission Youth Activity Guide

Date: Mid-July 2015

What: The ICTJ released a youth activity guide for students and teacher to reflect on the findings of Kenya’s recent Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TBRC). The guide examined select findings of the TBRC as they related to children and youth, providing the information in language that youth can understand and relate to. Additionally, activities were provided for students to do individually or in groups to reflect on the impact the conflict had on their families, communities, and society. For the release, my team hosted a conference in Kenya and presented the booklet to relevant stakeholders and Kenyan officials.

My Role: I assisted in drafting language and researching photos for the booklet, as well as provided feedback on content and images. Additionally, while the team was in Kenya presenting the booklet, I provided remote assistance for their presentation by helping with collecting images for their presentation.

Other Opportunities

• Digitized worksheets from a recent workshop with Ugandan children “children born of war”
• Provided editing and feedback on a forthcoming book chapter on Children/Youth & Reparations in Colombia
• Provided feedback on forthcoming book on transitional justice and education
• Drafted content for forthcoming website based on the recent ICTJ/Kofi Annan Foundation report, “Challenging the Conventional: Can Truth Commissions Strengthen Peace Processes?”
• Attended United Nations Security Council meeting on Children in Armed Conflict
• Attended release of the Children in Armed Conflict Accountability Framework launch at the UN

Timeline

Spring 2015
Applied Peacebuilding Course, SIPA

Fall 2015
Transitional Justice Course, Columbia Law

Summer 2015
ICTJ Internship

Beyond the Summer: Transitional Justice Course

Following my summer internship, I was then inspired to take Professor Graeme Simpson’s course, Transitional Justice, at Columbia Law School.

I used this opportunity to really think critically and analytically about many of the concepts I learned over the summer, such as:

• Agency: What agency (or perceived agency) do children and youth have in conflict? What agency do they have (or can they have) after conflict?
• Tokenization: Is youth engagement in transitional justice simply a “checking the box” exercise for international approval? Are youth being meaningfully engaged, or are they an after-thought?
• Perpetrators: Can children be perpetrators? How do we reconcile this with agency? And how do we understand and manage community resentment around the role children and youth play in conflict?
• Civic Engagement: What is the connection between youth civic engagement today, and long-term peace and stability?

Preparation: Applied Peacebuilding Course

My summer internship was part of a class on practical skills for peacebuilding practitioners taught by Professor Zachary Metz at Columbia SIPA. For the class, I prepared background research and a project plan to understand transitional justice and children and youth.

In the fall of 2015, I presented on my research at the annual Peacebuilding Symposium, in which all students from the Applied Peacebuilding course present on their summer internships.