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In the service of the IDI communities in Quindío, Colombia;
Nairobi, Kenya; Lagos, Nigeria; London, UK; and Richmond, USA

Healing Spiritual Harm: An Intergenerational Approach

Abstract: In communities which have their roots in histories of atrocities and injustice, and which continue to be shaped by the legacies of the past, intergenerational dialogue and inquiry processes can play a crucial role in breaking silence and supporting community members to recognize the deep interconnections between past, present and future. This chapter presents the aims and processes of the UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative's Intergenerational Dialogue and Inquiry (IDI) programme, which brings together young adults and community elders to explore their shared histories, present realities and future possibilities. Through a carefully held process, participants draw out stories of past and ongoing harms and begin to identify community-rooted resources and narratives of hope, resilience and collective healing, articulating and enacting transformation towards the co-creation of futures of mutual well-being. This chapter explores how the UNESCO IDI programme creates spaces for collective healing, including healing of spiritual harms, and outlines four interrelated imperatives for collective healing identified by participants. These imperatives highlight communities' recognition of the pressing needs for: public acknowledgement of past and ongoing harms; supportive communities and intergenerational networks with shared cultural practices and traditions; opportunities for encounter and connection across divides, including through arts and spiritual connection; and social transformation away from individualism towards systems governed by values of connectedness and compassion. The chapter directly quotes from IDI participants at length throughout to honour their voices and contributions.

Keywords: Spiritual harm, intergenerational dialogue, social transformation, collective healing, well-being.

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Introduction

I'm going to carry everything you've said with me for the rest of my life.

– Young adult participant, UK

Intergenerational dialogue and inquiry (IDI) processes bring together the voices of old and young to explore their shared histories, present realities and future possibilities. In communities which have their roots in histories of atrocities and injustice, and which continue to be shaped by the legacies of this past, such processes can play a crucial role in breaking silence and supporting individuals and groups to recognize the deep interconnections between past, present and future. Through carefully facilitated intergenerational dialogue and inquiry, communities can begin to articulate and enact the transformation needed towards the co-creation of futures that prioritize the well-being of all.

In 2023, the UNESCO¹ Collective Healing Initiative brought together groups of young adults (aged 18–35) and community elders to take part in a series of community-rooted IDI processes. All groups were hosted in communities with histories of mass atrocity, with a particular focus on communities affected by the ongoing legacies of transatlantic enslavement and colonial exploitation. Set within the framework of the UNESCO Routes of Enslaved Peoples project, the IDI programme sought to create opportunities for communities to engage in collective healing towards a future of co-flourishing. The programme was co-funded by the Fetzer Institute and the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace, and coordinated by

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

researchers at the foundation and the Global Humanity for Peace Institute at the University of Wales, Trinity St David.

The IDI programme worked with partner organisations and communities across five sites and four continents, with groups in Colombia, Kenya, Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the United States. Participation in the Quindío Region of Colombia was coordinated by two partners: Eduser and the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation Colombia, who worked closely with 10 young adults aged 18–30 and 20 community elders from five diverse backgrounds represented within the community, including Indigenous and Afro-Colombian backgrounds. Participation in Kenya was coordinated by Creators of Peace International, with facilitators from Creators of Peace Kenya. They brought together nine young adults aged 18–30 representing seven ethnic communities in Kenya, and eight community elders (aged 54–88) from the three counties of Nyeri, Nairobi and Mombasa. Participation in Lagos, Nigeria was coordinated by Creators of Peace International, with the support of Creators of Peace Nigeria. They worked closely with six young adults aged 20–23 from diverse family, ethnic and language backgrounds, who in turn identified 10 elders from their own communities. Participation in London, UK was coordinated by Creators of Peace UK, with six young adults aged 19–30 from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, including primarily African diaspora communities. These young adults identified and invited five community elders to the programme, including descendants of the Windrush generation and other African communities. In the United States, participation in the IDI programme was coordinated by two Richmond-based partners: Black Coalition of Change and Initiatives of Change USA. Representatives from both partners worked closely with four young adults aged 18–30 and nine community elders from diverse backgrounds represented within the Richmond community.

Against the backdrop of the conceptualisations of dehumanization developed in the first part of the book, and the recognition of widespread harms in communities in the wake of historic dehumanization, this chapter presents the objectives, methodology and approach of the UNESCO IDI programme and explores how IDI creates spaces for collective healing, with a focus on healing spiritual harm. Drawing together the voices of the diverse participating communities, it outlines four interrelated imperatives for collective healing that emerged from the UNESCO Intergenerational Dialogue and Inquiry processes. These imperatives highlight communities' recognition of the pressing needs for: public acknowledgement of past and ongoing harms; supportive communities and intergenerational networks with shared cultural practices and traditions; opportunities for encounter and connection across divides, including through arts and spiritual connection; and social transformation away from individualism towards systems governed by values of connectedness and compassion.

The experiences of IDI participants were captured through partner reports, and qualitative interviews and learning circles with young adults.² Many one-to-one and group dialogues and community stakeholder meetings were also audio recorded. With the consent of participants, these conversations have been drawn on to better understand and showcase the programme. We have directly quoted at length from participating young adults and community elders throughout to honour their voices and contributions.

Breaking Silence Towards New Narratives of Collective Wellbeing: The Role and Aims of IDI

The elders remind us of the heritage passed from our ancestors, especially those communal rituals, habits and practices. They are what bond us, and they are the treasures of our community. (Young adult, Richmond, US)

As connection spaces are opened, we can understand what else there is to heal—the process itself provides input and guidance, builds, and gives answers. (Community Elder, Colombia)

For people living in communities rooted in legacies of historical mass atrocity, silence is a common symptom of transgenerational trauma. By remaining silent about their own and their ancestors' experiences, individuals and communities seek to create a protective barrier around trauma—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes through coercion, sometimes through mutual consensus—evading truths too painful or too harmful to face. This silence is a barrier to healing and enables the transgenerational transmission of the effects of historical traumas.³

Sharing stories of trauma is a key step in ending the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next. But breaking silence about past and ongoing trauma is deeply complex and carries risks of re-traumatisation or transmission

2 All young adults were invited to participate in voluntary interviews via Zoom and in-person learning circles to capture their insights and experiences. Many thanks to Lina Malagon and Toto Mars for conducting interviews in Spanish and English, respectively, and to partners for hosting in-person learning circles.

3 Thompson (2010). *Confronting slavery: Breaking through the corridors of silence*; Heimannsborg & Schmidt (1997). *The collective silence: German identity and the legacy of shame*; Liem (2007). Silencing historical trauma: The politics and psychology of memory and voice. For a contextualised example of the insidious harms of such silencing, see Broussard (2013), who focuses on the impacts of “protective” silence of women and complicit silence (of men, of legal systems, of media) on the legacies of violence affecting women of African descent.

of trauma to witnesses. Therefore, intentional, skilfully facilitated spaces for caring listening, deep dialogue and mutual inquiry are essential to ensuring that voices speaking to past brutality, transgenerational trauma and present alienation are not re-silenced.⁴ Through deep dialogue and inquiry processes, participants can become consciously aware of the harms inflicted through historic acts of atrocity and their ongoing legacies. Such an awareness gives voice to silenced pains and grievances and draws attention to their traumatic effects, thus supporting an understanding of both the significance and the transformative potentials of the relationship between past–present–future.⁵

At the core of the IDI methodology, however, is the recognition that when silence is broken, sensitively and with great care, it does not only release stories of trauma. When history is acknowledged and explored, narratives of harm can be recognized and faced, and light can be shone on enduring narratives of hope, strength and resilience—stories of how communities sustained the values of love and humanity in the face of dehumanizing experiences. Drawing on the Akan concept of *Sankofa*—literally “to retrieve”⁶—IDI highlights the importance of returning for the “treasures” of our collective past as key to shaping our collective futures. When individuals and communities begin to unwrap the stories of past atrocities, alongside them emerge the communities’ “treasures”—stories of traditional practices and ancestral wisdom that have sustained and continue to nurture communities in the face of ongoing injustice and dehumanization. The IDI space creates the possibility for these personal and communal narratives of survival and resilience to be intentionally re-connected with the continuity of the community’s collective narratives, nurturing recognition of the deep interconnections between past–present–future and supporting cultural continuity.⁷

Tokarczuk⁸ articulates a notion of “tenderness”, which characterizes the experience of engaging with “deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering”. When we engage with tenderness, we go “far beyond empathetic fellow feeling”—we become

4 Wimberly (2011). *Story Telling and Managing Trauma: Health and Spirituality at Work*; McKinney (2007). “Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence”: Testimony, Traumatic Memory, and Psychotherapy with Survivors of Political Violence.

5 Aho (2014). The healing is in the pain: Revisiting and re-narrating trauma histories as a starting point for Healing.

6 Heinrichs (2023). *Sankofa* by Mahmood Ayobami Babalola.

7 Asamoah-Poku (2024). Preserving traditional Ghanaian folklore through storytelling.

8 Tokarczuk (2019). *The tender narrator* (p. 24).

conscious of our shared humanity.⁹ The sharing and recognition of “treasures” within the sacred dialogue and inquiry space has the potential to enable individuals from both “sides” of dehumanizing histories to reconnect with their own and others’ inherent human dignity and deepen their consciousness of the equal intrinsic value of all persons—the recognition that all persons are beings of non-instrumental value.

Furthermore, the exchange of voices between generations allows for stories to be invited, created, retold, curated and transformed.¹⁰ Narratives that have gone unquestioned face gentle interrogation; subtle biases and prejudices can be recognized; and new, shared narratives can be shaped together. Through this restor(y)ing, IDI can be transformative for participants’ present relationships and guide collective journeys towards healing within communities.¹¹ In the words of one young adult participant from Colombia:

This enriching dialogue fostered intergenerational connection and understanding with the community. By listening to stories of resilience we can be inspired and motivated to face our own challenges. Seeing examples of overcoming and success can help develop a positive mindset and build confidence.

Thus, IDI processes can help communities acknowledge their histories, identify cultural wisdom and spiritual practices of healing and well-being, and through this find the resources and motivation to co-create future-facing narratives which prioritize the well-being of all. In this way, IDI can play a key role in ending cycles and patterns of violence and healing the harms of past atrocities, including spiritual harms.

To close this section, we summarize the core aims and objectives of IDI processes, which guide the methodology laid out in the following section. This articulation of the objectives is taken from the UNESCO Collective Healing Handbook¹²:

- To create open (non-judgemental, trusting), courageous and caring spaces where all voices, experiences, perspectives and understandings are invited, shared and respected equally.

⁹ Hübl & Shridhare (2022). The ‘tender narrator’ who sees beyond time: A framework for trauma integration and healing.

¹⁰ Welch et al. (2020). Your story, our story: The transformative power of life narratives.

¹¹ Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (2024). *Collective healing towards just societies: Handbook for facilitators & co-creators*.

¹² Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (2024), p. 29.

- To engage participants in contextualizing the community's experiences of historical brutality, including recognizing the harms of dehumanizing acts, such as enslavement, colonialism, institutional racism and other mass atrocities, and their continued legacies.
- To inspire the values and practices of empathetic curiosity, deep listening-dialogue, compassion and mutual caring towards relational enrichment and well-being.
- To forge a collective healing alliance towards community regeneration.
- To empower citizens, especially women and young people, to play a proactive part in advocating for a healing-sensitive and caring socio-economic and political system fundamentally directed towards collective well-being.

These objectives emphasize the need for communities to explore the past as a way to deepen a shared understanding of peoples' lived realities in the present, and to enable groups in the community to co-imagine paths towards a better future.

IDI Processes and Activities

Participation in the UNESCO IDI programme was coordinated by local partner organisations that were selected for their expertise in facilitating dialogue circles and non-judgemental spaces for connection, reconciliation and healing. With the support of the project team, partners were responsible for identifying and accompanying a group of young adult participants and community elders from their networks on a journey of collective healing through intergenerational dialogue and inquiry.

In this section, we present the core processes and activities that constitute the IDI programme. While we present these as five distinct steps, these processes are mutually informing and at times inevitably overlap.

Building Partner Capacity

The coordinating team from GHFP worked closely with representatives from partner organisations to nurture their understandings of the core underlying values and ideas that inform the programme design and wider project. This included a two-day in-person meeting to build relationships within the team, followed by a series of monthly, online partner meetings. Partners' learning was supported through presentations and key documents, opportunities for sharing

and dialogue, and participation in relevant events such as the UNESCO Collective Healing Webinar series.¹³

Building Young Adults' Capacity

With the support of the GHFP team, partners in each setting next identified and contacted a diverse group of young adult participants from their region. Once young adult participants had been identified, partners began to prepare them for their role at the heart of the IDI processes.

The first stage was to nurture relational strengths within the group of young adults themselves. This process of relational enrichment looked different in each context—in some settings, people simply came together informally to share food, hospitality and stories and hopes for the process, in others, a more formal process of trust-building took place through a facilitated “peace circle” programme.¹⁴ The role of partners as experienced, caring, sensitive and trusted facilitators was established at this stage.

Once relationships of trust between young adult participants had been nurtured, partners then introduced them formally to the IDI aims, values, methodology and elements, encouraging young adults to engage in co-creating the upcoming processes and engage in exploratory dialogue on what IDI might look like in their contexts.

It was a key responsibility of all partners to engage young adult participants in a process of interrogating and understanding the complex histories of atrocities and ongoing legacies in their own settings and communities. Partners used a wide variety of resources and media to support young adults to connect with the realities of the historic harms, including film, story-sharing and formal presentations. A highlight for many was the inclusion of immersive field trips to sites of historical relevance, such as the slave trade port of Badagry in Nigeria and the Richmond Slave Trail guided walk in the United States.

In this way, partners nurtured participants' understandings of the context(s) in which the IDI programme was situated and sensitized them to the kinds of themes and issues that were likely to arise through IDI in their communities. As one young adult from Nigeria shared:

¹³ Global Humanity for Peace Institute (2023). *Collective healing webinar series: New perspectives on collective healing, social justice and well-being*.

¹⁴ Creators of Peace International (n.d.). *Peace circles*.

Truly, Auntie went the length and breadth of this country, trying to help us see how slavery has eaten deep into our roots and has caused a lot of disadvantages for us. At first, I thought this was about us getting reparations, getting what was lost back. Then I started understanding ... this was not first of all about getting what has been stolen or getting what has been taken, it was first of all about getting healed.

Capacity building continued throughout the programme, with an explicit focus on building the core skills of facilitation, sharing and deep listening without judgement. It included practical and experiential approaches to learning, alongside keynotes and formal presentations from experts in the fields of peacebuilding and collective healing.

One-to-one Conversations Between Youth and Community Elders

Once embedded in the programme values and methodology, with an enriched understanding of the historical and contemporary terrain in their own contexts, young adults were encouraged to engage in one-to-one conversations with elders from their communities. In many settings, the young adults took responsibility for identifying relevant community elders, with the support of partners as needed. Boundaried by a series of guiding questions, these one-to-one intergenerational conversations were an opportunity to enter into deep dialogue together, sharing and exploring one another's stories in relation to legacies of enslavement and colonialism, spiritual harm, and capacities for resilience and healing.

The format and settings of dialogues were shaped by youth and elders together; some pairs chose to dialogue whilst walking in nature, others sat together in a quiet spot, often of special personal or cultural significance; and others dialogued whilst sharing the hospitality of the family home. In some settings, one-to-one dialogue conversations were hosted as breakout opportunities within a larger circle dialogue event, thereby allowing partners to continue to provide a "holding space" or container for more challenging conversations.

Regardless of the setting, a set of important values sit at the core of these one-to-one conversations, as well as of the group dialogues described in the following section. These include the importance of creating an open, caring and courageous space, where participants are invited to be fully present; of ensuring opportunities for mutual listening to and sharing of stories and mutual questioning and exploration of past–present–future; and of creating the conditions for collective reflection and meaning-making that contextualizes personal narratives and experiences of contemporary harm within wider historical and social contexts, and explores implications and resources for individual and collective healing.

In these one-to-one conversations, hosted within the support network of the wider group and the guiding framework for inquiry, opportunities arose for silence to be broken and for participants to trust each other enough to share stories both of historical harms and of culturally-rooted “treasures” that sustained and sustain the community. Honouring young adults’ stories and insights as of equal value to those of the community elders, through talking together, young adults and elders, often coming from very different contexts, upbringings and cultures, found new ways to understand their own and others’ stories and the stories of their communities.

Group Conversations Between Young Adults and Community Elders

Once all participants had engaged in one-to-one dialogue conversations, partners then brought together elders and young adults for a series of in-person group dialogues, leading towards a public stakeholder meeting. These intensive dialogues were an opportunity for all participants to connect, share their significant experiences from the one-to-one dialogues, explore relevant themes and stories further, and unpack key ideas, drawing out stories of healing practices and wisdom that had emerged from the dialogues and reflecting together on these learnings.

Young adults and elders engaged in the mutual sharing of stories across generations and cultures and were guided by partners to recognize the deep connections between their personal and communal experiences in the present, and the complex historical terrain in the community’s past. Against this backdrop, they were supported to begin to articulate new understandings about the nature of collective trauma and healing, and to explore new narratives for future-making aimed at structural transformation for social justice and communal well-being.

Drawing on the practices of Indigenous American talking circles, which have traditionally been safe spaces that ensure all voices within the community are heard,¹⁵ partners made use of the principle of the circle in facilitation of these conversations, ensuring that all participants were given space to share and to be listened to. Applications of talking circle methodology beyond Indigenous settings have highlighted the potentials of such spaces, when held with care, to foster multicultural awareness and mutual respect, facilitate group cohesion,¹⁶ develop a sense of community, and nurture the development of listening skills and

¹⁵ Reed (2021). A critical review of the Native American tradition of circle practices.

¹⁶ Wolf & Rickard (2003). Talking circles: A Native American approach to experiential learning.

empathy.¹⁷ Participants were encouraged to draw on the practices of deep listening and sharing nurtured through the relational capacity building processes, ensuring an open, caring and courageous sharing space, and engaging in rituals of mutual gratitude and appreciation.

Community Stakeholders Meeting

In the final formal step of the programme, young adults and elders worked with the support of partners to design and host community stakeholder meetings. The main aims of these meetings were to showcase the key learning and insights from the IDI processes to the wider community and to initiate public conversations and action around the significant structural changes needed to facilitate collective healing towards futures of well-being of all.

These public-facing meetings formed opportunities to explore the findings from the programme with community leaders, including political, religious and Indigenous leaders, historians and academics, non-governmental organisations, activists, and educators. The events, which in different settings ranged from two hours to three days, included formal presentations and in-depth sharing, as well as immersive art-based and spiritual activities, such as songs, dance, Indigenous rituals and shared food. Through these public events, IDI participants engaged the wider community in the consolidation of future-facing narratives, bringing the deeply intimate experiences and learning from the IDI processes into the wider public sphere.

IDI and Healing Spiritual Harm

With an understanding of the values, intentions, methodology and structure of the IDI programme in hand, we may now turn our attention to how the processes of community-rooted IDI engages in healing the spiritual harms of historical atrocities and their intergenerational legacies.

Rarely directly acknowledged or addressed, spiritual harm or wounding may be understood as the most fundamental kind of harm an individual may undergo because it has the potential to impair their consciousness of and connections to that which is valuable. By virtue of this, as we saw in Chapter Two, spiritual harm may inhibit our capacities to relate and care, to recognize our own

17 Wilbur et al. (2001). Talking circles: Listen, or your tongue will make you deaf.

human dignity, and to connect with the transcendent. According to Thomson, to recognize spiritual harm, we must acknowledge that human beings have a *sacred or non-instrumentally valuable core*¹⁸—and that, like the body and the mind, this core is vulnerable to violence and trauma. Just as the body may be wounded and the mind may suffer psychological torment in the wake of mass atrocity, the spirit is likely to also suffer harm. However, unlike physical and even emotional trauma, spiritual harm, which may often be transgenerationally transmitted, can be much harder to recognize and even harder to address. Thus, the documentation and sharing of good practice which directly engages participants in healing at the spiritual level are of vital importance as part of the collective healing endeavour.

Drawing on the conception of spiritual harm proposed in Chapter Two, we recognize that spiritual harm may manifest across the manifold aspects of individual and collective experiences. Significantly, spiritual harm may occur:

- at the **emotional/psychological** level, the level of our capacities to feel, appreciate, connect and engage emotionally, which may diminish our evaluative awareness and capacities to engage in and connect to what is most meaningful. In practice, this may impair our capacities to appreciate others, to engage in meaningful relationships and form meaningful connections, and to engage in or recognize meaningful work or activities.
- at the level of **self-consciousness**, when we become unable to recognize our own sacred dignity as a human being. Symptoms of such harm include experiences of low self-worth, which can lead to acceptance of experiences of exploitation as inevitable or justified.
- at the level of **connection of our “soul” or “spirit” with the transcendent or Divine**, when we are unable to recognize life’s purposes or meaning, or to connect with something “greater” or “beyond”.

The processes involved in the community-rooted IDI are deeply invested in the healing of spiritual harm at all three levels.

Let us consider first some of the ways in which the IDI methodology and practices may nurture healing of spiritual harm at the emotional or psychological level. At the very core of the IDI methodology is the creation of spaces which nurture guided emotional and conceptual openness, exploration of what matters most to us as individuals and communities, and deep, honest sharing of these together, with the support of experienced facilitators. Through the opportunities to witness the stories of others’ lived experiences, and to share one’s own, spaces are opened up for mutual recognition and appreciation.

¹⁸ Weil (1943). Human personality.

The IDI space is one of carefully held openness, where all are encouraged to encounter difference and to recognize that we have much more common in our human experience than otherwise. The dialogue spaces, in particular the group spaces, are opportunities to connect with others on a deep emotional level, to re-animate our emotional connectedness and, through witnessing the humanity of others, to regain our sensitivities to what matters and to the value of our deep human connections. In the words of one community elder from Richmond, US:

This intergenerational dialogue is healing because we're able to see ourselves in each other ... If I can get the best of you and you can get the best of me, then it's no longer the best in you and the best in me, it's the best in us, the best of us.

Here we may find Tokarczuk's notion of tenderness particularly relevant; when participants are brought to a space where they experience deep emotional concern about others, it allows them to recognize their deep interconnectedness and shared values, and often the responsibilities that those values demand.

Through the same mechanisms, IDI processes can nurture spiritual healing at the level of self-consciousness. We have seen how IDI raises and values the voices of marginalized or oppressed communities and individuals who have historically been silenced. The opportunities engendered by the IDI processes bring these voices to the fore and create spaces for them to be accepted, valued and heard. Young adult participants further reported that thanks to the co-creative nature of the processes throughout, and through the opportunities to develop public events to showcase the IDI later in the process, the IDI raised their self-confidence as they developed their capacities in youth leadership, public speaking, and event design, planning and management.

Most significant from the perspective of spiritual healing at the level of the self-conscious, however, were participants' experiences of reconnecting with others and with what is of value, which helped to shine light upon participants' own self-perceptions. As we hear and receive others and their stories as valuable, we are likewise affirmed by others. In the recognition of the sacred dignity of others, we can become able to recognize our own. As one elder from an Indigenous community in Colombia shared:

This makes me feel very good, that you have looked at me. It makes me feel like a big person ... It is important that I am able to transmit to the youth.

Through the sharing of deeply personal narratives of dehumanization and atrocity, and the contextualisation of these in universal historical narratives, alongside personal and communal narratives of spiritual resilience and healing, IDI partici-

pants are supported to recognize the patterns in narratives of trauma and healing and see how they as an individual may be liberated from limiting patterns which are trauma-led. With the creation of intentional spaces throughout the IDI processes for quiet reflection and open, courageous sharing, the conditions are created for spiritual healing at the level of self-consciousness.

Interpretations of both the concept of *Sankofa* and Indigenous conceptions of the “medicine wheel” emphasize the importance of integrating the past and present in shaping a collective future. This integration of past–present–future is key to restoring wholeness, reminding us of the inherent interdependence and relationality of existence, and the importance of balance in integrating the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental.¹⁹ One young adult participant in Kenya reminded their group:

We have all been dismantled from our origin. We cannot raise up another generation until there is collective healing.

When the group collectively draw together narratives of past–present–future and see how their shared past, current experiences and future dreams are so deeply interconnected, for many participants this engenders a deep sense of hope and purpose, and a feeling of commitment to a higher aim or ideal—a spiritual calling to act. Through their experiences, many participants also experience deeper connection with what some may call the Divine, others the transcendent, with something “beyond”. As one young adult from Nigeria shared:

One strong thing I found in this process was Love. There was Love, undiluted Love.

Through IDI, the transgenerational harms inflicted upon the spirit by historical atrocities and their legacies begin to be brought to light, acknowledged and attended to—creating spaces for healing and the co-creation of futures which prioritize the holistic (including spiritual) well-being of all.

Healing Imperatives: Insights from Communities

As we have seen, the healing of spiritual harm needs to be understood as a complex notion which relates to a wide range of aspects of a person’s lived experience. As participants engaged deeply in the IDI processes they began to

¹⁹ Ross (2014). *Indigenous healing: Exploring traditional paths*; Glover (2018). A tribute to Kwikwëxwelhp: Returning to the teachings.

identify the key levers which make such healing possible, articulating the collective healing needs within their communities.

We will close this chapter by presenting the main common themes and ideas that arose from across these highly diverse contexts and groups, which highlight four interconnected needs for collective healing, including the healing of spiritual harm. For healing to go deeper and reach beyond IDI participants, it is suggested that communities must begin to recognize and meet these healing needs to make possible the transformation of systems which perpetuate structures of inequality and oppression towards relational, just alternatives.

As we shall see, participants highlighted the need for: public acknowledgement of past and ongoing harms; supportive, intergenerational networks with shared cultural practices and traditions; opportunities for encountering difference; and systemic and cultural transformation from individualism towards co-flourishing. We have unpacked these themes below with the support of comments from young adults and elders from across the programme.

The Need for Public Awareness of Dehumanizing Histories

Understanding untangles the knots of pain.

– Community elder, Colombia

Many young adult participants, in particular in Kenya and Nigeria, shared that they experienced shock as they came to understand the complex histories of atrocities such as the transatlantic slave trade and enslavement and colonialism, and began to recognize the legacies of these histories across all aspects of their own and others' lived experiences.

Through IDI, participants not only unpacked the roles of both European enslavers and local African enablers in making the enslavement of more than 12 million Africans possible, but also explored the contemporary legacies of these histories. They began to examine how subsequent generations on both "sides" may have internalized colonial narratives of superiority and inferiority; how the erasure and rewriting of history may leave many unable to identify the roots or causes of their own individual or collective ill-being, which in turn disrupts the ability to connect past–present–future; and how these may all generate cycles of frustration and conflict at individual and community levels.

In the wake of these realisations, participants from all IDI settings highlighted the urgent global need to raise public awareness of the complex histories of atrocities such as the transatlantic slave trade and enslavement and colonialism, and their legacies, to allow for formal processes of recognition, grieving, apology, atonement and, ultimately, forgiveness.

In the first instance, IDI participants emphasized the burgeoning need for governments and education policy makers to develop robust public history education for all. A history education based in facts and that acknowledges the complexities of both past and ongoing trauma was felt to be sorely lacking across continents. In the words of young adults from the United Kingdom and Kenya, respectively:

When I reflect on the history teaching I had, they weren't telling us the truth—we weren't seeing the truth.

I came to realize through the [IDI] process that there is a lot of that history of what happened that is not documented, that is not in the books that we learn in school, and I came to learn a lot more.

Participants highlighted that without such an education, without the understanding of the historical terrain and the ways in which dehumanizing histories shape present cycles of injustice and ill-being, communities will remain widely ill-equipped to shape futures that enable collective healing together. As a young adult from the United Kingdom put it:

What's missing from many countries, including colonized countries, is honest discussion about our history. Schools and institutions need to take this as a priority to prevent history from repeating itself. Because if you keep ignoring it, and you keep running away, that's exactly what allows these systems to persist.

Furthermore, understanding, facing and honouring our histories and their complexities are deeply necessary processes in enabling communities to grieve, to forgive and to transcend divisive historical patterns. As a community elder from Colombia emphasized—"Crying also heals"—grieving is part of the collective healing journey and is often an essential first step towards forgiveness.²⁰ The relationships between acknowledgement, grief, apology and forgiveness are always complex, and even more so in the highly intricate terrain of the histories of transatlantic enslavement and colonialism. One of the young adults in Nigeria observed:

We deserve an apology. That is the truth. We deserve an apology. There's a process of forgiveness and to forgive, an apology must be made. But are we ready for the apology? [Knowing this history], to forgive, we also have to apologize to ourselves.

²⁰ Thomson (2021). Collective healing: Towards a conceptual framework; Potter (2006). *Trauma, truth and reconciliation*.

Importantly for collective healing, gaining awareness of and acknowledgment of the past is necessary to allow individuals and communities to understand and face the contemporary challenges in their communities; without this, those challenges cannot be transformed. IDI participants recognized this as the responsibility of all communities, on both “sides” of dehumanizing histories. As a community elder from Richmond, US, and a young adult from the United Kingdom and a young adult from Nigeria suggest:

We as a people went wrong years ago, we did not truly realize and understand the purpose and the effects of slavery. And we as the descendants of enslaved Africans fail to honour the innocent bloodshed of our ancestors.

Young people of Caucasian origin also need to face their history, take responsibility and not perpetuate what is not right in the system worldwide.

We as Africans have to take the handles and define our story—define our history and tell our story in the way we want it to be told. History really has touched everyone. When we dig deep and look far, we see that our parents, grandparents, and those around us still have tales to tell about this part of history.

However, this awareness and responsibility cannot only be engaged at the grassroots level. IDI participants highlighted the vital responsibility of global leaders to recognize and act upon the need for public understanding and awareness as a first step towards healing the complex historical and contemporary ills, and to make possible the co-creation of futures that proactively acknowledge and learn from our shared histories.

The Need for Sustaining Supportive Communities

They come back together as a community to fortify themselves. To talk about it.

– Young adult participant, Nigeria

As they reflected on their communities’ historical resources for sustaining hope and building resilience in the face of trauma and adversity, IDI participants recognized that throughout long histories of oppression, and in the face of widespread ongoing trauma, there is a deep need for building and sustaining close-knit communities and intergenerational, family networks. Much like the intergenerational sharing spaces created through the IDI programme, such communities have historically served and continue to serve as safe spaces to

share struggles, heal and build resilience, including countering internalized racism²¹ and nurturing positive identity and self-worth.

For many, the value of such close community networks or groups related strongly to the creation of spaces for sharing—for articulating and acknowledging traumatic or painful experiences. One community elder from the United Kingdom shared how, growing up amongst deep-seated racial prejudice, having a peer group who understood the challenges of their existence and were willing to informally talk things over helped to sustain their own and others' mental wellbeing:

I used to go around with a group of other young black boys, and then we would talk about our own experiences. And some of the experiences that I have, somebody else would have it, and then we would just talk about it. And it really helped us because you know you're gonna meet on a Saturday evening, and you're gonna talk about it. So, you sort of offload on each other. If you didn't have people whom you could offload things to, you could really go mental because you're made to think that you're not human.

This same phenomenon was articulated in Colombia by a young adult and community elder, respectively:

It's that feeling of trust that we have, that you can feel. There's sadness, but with that strength and joy. And resilience ... The sadness of his hard life story ... He told it to me as a way of crying.

Being able to put wounds into words with other members of the community is in itself healing.

Family, religious and community networks can offer opportunities for individuals to acknowledge and express experiences of common challenges and vulnerabilities, and share approaches to resilience, including shared remembering, rituals, ceremonies and community wisdom. One young adult from an Indigenous community in Colombia shared how this kind of mutual support is a normal part of how their community relates to one another.

Coexistence in [Indigenous] communities like mine is very different from coexistence in the city. In our communities we are always supporting the neighbour ... Being there for people who need it has always been in my life, getting closer to people and being able to contribute to their lives. That unity is strength.

21 Watts-Jones (2002). Healing internalized racism: The role of a within-group sanctuary among people of African descent.

Rituals such as sharing stories of family history across generations, remembering traditional wisdom through proverbs, taking part in traditional practices, and engaging in traditional healing arts were all emphasized as elements which strengthen the value of such communities for young adults and elders today. A young adult participant from Colombia highlighted the endogenous nature of the kinds of intergenerational story-sharing which form the core of the IDI, emphasizing the importance of passing on wisdom and traditions across generations:

In the Indigenous and Chocoan communities there is a great oral tradition around the fireplace. In the Indigenous community, strength came through the tenacity of the elders. Protection and resistance were obtained through strengthening and organizing the community.

Participants likewise highlighted the centrality of ritualized cultural practices within the creation and maintenance of safe, relationally enriching communal spaces—in itself a collective healing process. UK participants offered the example of the significant role played by the traditional preparation of tea, which takes time and care to prepare, a ritual which ensures that community members sit together for an extended time—to share, to listen, to connect. A tradition which UK participants' families had brought with them from their respective African cultures, these tea spaces were identified as healing spaces—opportunities to draw strength from one another before re-exposure to the harms beyond the family or supportive community walls. In the words of a UK young adult and a community elder, respectively:

Somali tea—it's not just tea, it's an offering of friendship. It's a way to open up little communities within your home. It's a mediator in difficult conversations. It's a thing that people turn to.

In the Senegalese tradition, what they call the Ataya—the ritual of how you pour the tea—it's actually a mandate tradition all the way across West Africa. And it's used for bringing people together. This is what bonds us in community—these acts and these practices is what bonds us. There is trauma that I feel around the fact that we are losing those practices. In my house, ceremony is important.

The vital roles played by religious and spiritual practices and faith in sustaining hope, strength and resilience both historically and as a part of facing contemporary injustice were likewise emphasized by IDI participants. As one community elder in the United Kingdom shared:

A lot of people in Africa and in the African diaspora, they were religious people and so they use God as their springboard. So they will they go to church, they pray, and they will dance and they make music. Like the slaves working in the rich houses, every night after they finished working, they would lock themselves in a room and just dance. They used music to make them sane ... Then they're going back to be suppressed.

The sustaining power of shared faith can be recognized in examples of faith not only in the Divine, but also of faith in a “greater purpose”, as outlined by a community elder from Richmond, US:

The belief in that greater purpose sometimes gives us a strength to endure what we didn't think that we could endure. I remember a young lady saying to me: “I asked my mother, my grandmother, ‘why did you go through this or why did you survive this?’ And her answer was, ‘because I knew you were coming’.” We have to always know that somebody else is coming, because when somebody else is coming, we're not just surviving, we're sacrificing. That enhanced the responsibility in me to make sure that I engage myself in these circles.

As when we dance together, when individuals or communities believe in and identify with such shared purpose—in this case the need to build a better future for their descendants—they may be brought to recognize their own dignity and value, and the important role that they as individuals and as a community can play in shaping a future that prioritizes collective healing and well-being over individual gain.

Close-knit communities which create spaces for cultural continuity and for nurturing the well-being and self-worth of individuals have historically played and continue to play a key role in healing. In the words of one young adult from Colombia:

The healing of our own traumas, we do in community—to overcome and not repeat traumas to future generations.

Yet cultures of hyper-individualism, driven by social fragmentation, hyper-consumerism, neoliberalism and the digitization of late-stage capitalism, are increasingly widespread, particularly in the West.²² Such individualism is harmful to the maintenance of communal life, but it is far more damaging to the relational values and processes which support communal well-being, particularly on a structural level.²³ The more well-being is considered an individual pursuit, the less well-

22 Fisher (2009). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?*; Baudrillard (1999). *The consumer society*; Baudrillard (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*.

23 Hopper (2003). *Rebuilding communities in an age of individualism*.

being is understood as collective, mutual and relational. As cultures of individualism become more and more widespread, and expectations on youth to relocate away from extended family for employment increase,²⁴ the crucial supportive networks identified by participants are at risk. Whilst legacies of trauma continue to deeply shape our societies, it is vital that the essential role being played by these supportive communities is not overlooked and that they can continue to be sustained.

The Need for Encounter and Connection

You're not an island.

— Young adult participant, Nigeria

Drawing on their experiences of the IDI, through which they were given opportunities to encounter multiplicity and difference and to create and sustain meaningful connections with others from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, participants highlighted the need for communities to create, nurture and expand spaces and practices that reject narratives of violence and alienation. These spaces must affirm the dignity of all persons, providing opportunities for meaningful and dialogic encounter and connection between those with different backgrounds and perspectives.

Participation in such spaces requires a commitment to deep, empathic listening, through different channels, without judgement, and with openness and a willingness to learn from each other. As one elder from the United Kingdom and a young adult from Nigeria respectively shared:

The first thing needed on both sides is acceptance. To accept the person for being a human being like yourself. And try to find out about them.

If we're going to have collective healing, we're going to have to hear one another. You have to have honest conversations with yourself about whatever you need to be healed from. Then you're going to have to have honest conversations with others, and be ready to hear the other side. And be ready to be taught—to see the community as a teaching institution.

Participants across the IDI emphasized that both arts-based cultural practices (such as music, dance, food, painting and poetry) and spiritual and religious practices, which in cultures of African descent are often interconnected, can play a key role in creating opportunities for encounter and connection and through

²⁴ Adaki (2023). The role of Westernization in the changing African family structures: A systematic literature review; Mayowa (2019). Family institution and modernization: A sociological perspective.

these, building spiritual resilience and healing. Such practices can help us to connect with our own experiences and humanity, and from there to build bridges beyond the individual self towards embracing otherness and our shared responsibilities.

The potentials of arts-based practices in nurturing resilience, self-awareness and powerful connectedness with others was a theme that arose across participants, especially those living in diaspora communities. Participants shared both the significance of arts in sustaining them within their supportive, close-knit communities, but also as a vehicle for reaching towards recognition of the shared humanity of all—a key element in healing spiritual harm. In the words of one young adult from the United Kingdom:

We have so much connecting us, and I've found that writing is one of the best ways to express questions of identity or questions of grievance or loss or trauma or healing.

Another UK young adult, in dialogue with a community elder, observed how:

The centre of many, many cultural practices is food. And dance—that sharing of rhythm and of movement. The rhythm of dance, the drums. The rhythm of life. Was this a way of surviving? Or sharing? People coming together, having to come together, forced in these positions of coming together, forming communities to find strength in each other, using rhythms, music, food, as a way of spirituality and hope for the future?

Art is inherently relational,²⁵ with the potential to connect individuals with their own human experiences, communities and cultures, whilst simultaneously connecting them with universal human experiences. As an elder from the United Kingdom and a young adult from Colombia shared:

I can use poetry to go really deep within and explore. It helps me understand some things that I can't even yet articulate, and that my logical brain will not provide clarity on. In the poetry, I get these openings of awareness and awakenings.... I also paint and there's a saying amongst artists, without the gaze of another, the work is incomplete.

Even in pain, one dances.

We saw in the previous section how for many, engagement in spiritual practices was key to nurturing close-knit, sustaining communities. The potential for shared spiritual or religious practices to bring together diverse individuals to experience encounter and to recognize their shared humanity, purpose and responsibilities was also articulated by participants. Goodman²⁶ highlights the importance of the

²⁵ Strosnider (2011). Nothing becomes something.

²⁶ Goodman (2024). Have we lost the “soul” of the black church: Returning to our roots.

historically collectivist approach of African American Church traditions, and their role in nurturing community activism, as a means to transform social and political injustices. This is borne out by the experiences of one young adult participant from Richmond, US, who shared:

My church has diverse peoples—when we worship together, we unlock possibilities beyond individuals.

Throughout the IDI, participants emphasized how opportunities where it is possible for individuals to come together in a space of intentional encounter to recognize their shared humanity and shared responsibilities are a vital part of moving beyond narratives of “us and them” towards the creation of new narratives of collective healing. Such opportunities come in many guises, but they are made possible by a willingness to engage with openness, to suspend judgement and to truly seek to hear the other. Through such spaces, it becomes possible to “see ourselves in each other” and together to find “the best of us”.²⁷

The Need for Systemic Transformation and Building New Cultural Narratives

Now we have to move into a spiritual warfare against individualism.

– Community elder, Richmond, US

The final of the four healing needs highlighted by IDI participants was the importance of co-creating new cultural narratives underpinned by the recognition of the sacred human dignity of all, and of action to ensure the transformation of systems to reflect the values of these new narratives. Participants highlighted that this must involve engagement simultaneously in high-level political arenas and at the grassroots level to ensure transformation across all sectors towards shared futures of co-flourishing.

Participants emphasized that work at the systems level is the lynchpin in making healing possible. As a community elder from Richmond, US, articulated:

With the right foundation, you can construct the right building. When you have the right building, you can accomplish the great goals. What we’re doing today is laying the right foundation so that we can construct a solid building so that we can make a difference in our future.

27 Community elder, Richmond, US.

A young adult from Richmond continues the thought:

How do we escape the cycle of continuing to play into systems that were never constructed for us to prosper? How do we get out of this achievement rat race, that we know does not lead to anything that's worth having?

Two UK elders further elucidate the problem:

There are policies in the world that are fundamentally so wrong and evil. If somebody is racist to you interpersonally you can identify it, but the fact that millions of people's life chances are impacted by systemic racism is far more scary to me. And they will go their whole lives without realizing that.

Part of the legacy of both colonialism and slavery is that it has continued to date. Policies and systems—structures are in place that absolutely make it impossible to navigate to make meaningful progress.

Changing those systems is no small undertaking, but as two community elders from the United Kingdom and Nigeria, respectively, note, this task is the responsibility of all, and it is necessary that these changes happen “in concert”—they rely on each other to be truly effective:

We have to ... ensure that the exploitation stops—that is our responsibility to fight for. It's a lifetime battle that needs everybody.

We need to start evolving systems that suit our peculiarities [in Africa]. We need to go back to Indigenous African values and norms and systems. We should promote Indigenous knowledge, we should generate our own solutions—develop, restructure or reframe in line with our existential realities. We need to make major changes, but we need to do all of them in concert.

IDI participants across contexts articulated a strikingly shared vision for what new cultural narratives are needed to underpin a new politics of mutual well-being. Repeatedly highlighted was the deep need across all sectors to reject individualist, consumerist and capitalist values, and other values of oppressive systems, and move towards embracing what many participants framed as Indigenous African values—values of community, unity, inclusion, contentment, love, joy, hospitality, sharing and acknowledgement.²⁸ One UK young adult shared their lived experience of these values in the following way:

²⁸ Cf. The Anishinaabe value of “kiizhewaatiziwin”, perhaps best translated as “living a life of love, kindness, sharing and respect”, see Kinew (2016). *Indigenous knowledge in a globalized world*; Glover (2018).

I think there's an African spirit—that joy, the laughter—it's shared. And it's so beautiful, it's so unique. Something I love to see is African women, Latin American women—they come together and they have an energy between them that's like sparks. There's a sense of joy, a sense of sisterhood—making family where you don't have blood relations. This feeling of having family in the people around you, in the best people. That's what community feels like to me. And that's something to be proud of and to hold on to. It's so special.

Others shared some of their experiences of the relevant values thus:

That sense of hospitality [in Africa], it's unlike any other. You could be a stranger and they'll say: "No! Come for dinner!" (Community elder, UK)

What I see when I go across Africa is ... the spirit of contentment, as against capitalism. They are in their tiny little villages ... they sit in the evenings and tell stories and that is contentment. I am proud of who I am. They dress in their beads and shawls and everything and they are not looking for Calvin Klein they are not looking for Roger Gucci they are just content. They love, they tell stories of their love. (Community elder, UK)

I spoke to five elders, and one thing they kept telling me was "it took the community to raise a child". And that's one of the things we're losing now because a lot of parents are trying to copy Western ideas, Western concepts. (Young adult, Nigeria)

As we look at our inclusivity, we have to include all brilliance, all minds, all ways of looking and thinking and perceiving as we move towards thriving. (Community elder, US)

In the service of building new narratives which hold these values at their core, there is a need for significant high-level political engagement and intervention to build and nurture thriving communities, moving beyond values of individualism towards values of community and mutual flourishing. In the experiences of IDI participants, current national and regional structures (including systems of education, economics, law and healthcare) typically fail to embody the values needed for collective healing or futures of mutual co-flourishing. Likewise, concerns were raised about global systems, which continue to marginalize and perpetuate injustices towards the Global South.

Participants therefore recognized the need for policy makers at all levels to engage with the process of systemic transformation—to first of all understand the histories that shape the contemporary social terrain and then to recognize the deep need for policy to be guided by new narratives that affirm the dignity of all. In the words of a young adult from Nigeria and an elder from Richmond, US:

Now we need to go deep and try to heal [the wound] from the base. We need policy, especially policy makers, to be aware of the psychological aspect of the effects of slavery and colonialism, even till today.

In the 20th century, the regulations whereby we'd hire and fire were lethal for us [African Americans] as a people. And we now need to revisit and deconstruct them—and tear down some of those disqualifiers there. There and in all sectors of life.

Whilst the transformation of systems towards justice and healing is first and foremost the responsibility of policy makers and global and community leaders, participants emphasized that transformation at the policy level needs to work alongside widespread grassroots engagement to advocate cultural narratives and systems that engender fairer and more inclusive societies in which healing can take place, and which lay the ground for a future of thriving for all. Participants emphasized the importance of intergenerational and intergroup cooperation, of dialogue and of working together to acknowledge harmful narratives and structures, and, in the words of one participant in Richmond, to seek solutions “shoulder to shoulder”. We will close this section with comments from young adults in Nigeria and Colombia, and a call to action from a community elder in Nigeria:

When community leaders come together to give each other a chance and let peace reign, there is communication and friendship.

The traumas that people experience throughout history will be overcome when we live in an environment where people feel heard, accepted and respected for who they are, without any objection to how they look, how they dress or their language.

Take it as a life's mission. Africa will not change unless we do it. It doesn't matter the field—arts, media, legal, policy, banking, whatever. You name it, but it has to be a mission.

Part of our traditional governance system in many African societies is that the grassroots is where leadership starts—men and women begin to change, little by little, and then tell their story—and it goes up.... You're not threatening the big Daddies and Uncles and Aunties, but the more people see, the more they will start to see a new story, slowly.

It is a 25-year plan. It takes one to stick to their guns, do something that locals, that people in Somalia, in Nigeria, wherever, can see and can believe in. And they can't do without.

Closing words

I have been to the dungeons to feed the ghosts; Was I scared? I fear more the Silence of the living.

Kwadwo Opoku Agyemang, Cape Coast Castle

This chapter highlights the roles that intergenerational dialogue and inquiry may play in breaking silence and creating the conditions for healing historical harms, including spiritual harms, and for transforming communities towards futures of co-flourishing. Through the dedication and skill of community partners, and the

commitment and generosity of participants, the UNESCO IDI programme created opportunities for the creation of new understandings of historic and ongoing dehumanization, spiritual harm and collective healing, and sowed the seeds of transformation within the participating communities. In all settings, the IDI programme has inspired young adult participants and elders to continue to work alongside one another to further the cause of collective healing through community projects and advocacy. Many participants have gone on to become advisors, ambassadors, trainers and facilitators for the UNESCO Collective Healing Circle (CHC) programme, which brings the values, approaches and elements of the IDI together as a more formal programme.

It remains only to extend deepest gratitude to each one of the IDI participants and partners who shared their stories, their wisdom and their humanity, and without whom this story could not be told.

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