IRCT International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims

Strategy

2022–2025

Blanca Lilia Jiménez, the ‘grandmother’, leads protests for social justice and protection of human rights in Cali, Colombia, (May) 2021

Photo by Luis Robayo / AFP; Intervened with crayon, aquarelle and texts by Marcelo Brodsky, 2021
Human Rights in Our Time

The world of human rights is changing. From Colombia to Belarus, Nigeria to Myanmar, there is unprecedented public awareness about the importance of human rights in our everyday lives. More people - and especially the younger generations - are standing up and speaking out to defend universal rights, including the right to freedom from torture. Motivated by lived experience, they protest and amplify their voices in new ways using art, technology and social media.

We are seeing a diverse and resolute public that is defiant in the face of authoritarianism and shrinking civil society space. Geopolitical shifts, conflicts and humanitarian crises, climate change and extreme social, racial and economic inequality, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, all pose fundamental obstacles to human rights.

In this context, States are utilising torture to suppress dissent, silence civil society and further repress and marginalise the LGBTI+ community, racial and ethnic minorities, women and children, people living in poverty, and others. Torture is being used widely by law enforcement and security forces and represents the ultimate betrayal by those States of their responsibility to protect their people. Yet, as the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture documented in his 2021 report to the UN General Assembly, torture continues with almost complete impunity because States dismiss it, deny responsibility and obstruct accountability processes, including victims’ rights to participation, redress and rehabilitation.

As the leading global expert on investigating and documenting torture and rehabilitating survivors, the IRCT is centrally placed to tackle these mounting challenges and build on the opportunities that we see. Our Strategy is informed by the voices of torture survivors treated in our member centres, which come together to form powerful evidence of the ongoing abuses and a unified demand for accountability and lasting change.

Lela Tsiskarishvili
President

Lisa Henry
Secretary General
We are a global network of civil society organisations that provide rehabilitation to torture survivors and fight for justice.

Our membership consists of 161 organisations in 76 countries, with over 4,000 staff backed by a Secretariat in Copenhagen and an office in Brussels.

Each year, we collectively support more than 50,000 torture survivors to rebuild their lives and engage in over 12,000 advocacy interventions to promote justice and reparations for victims, and to try to end torture.

Among the 76 countries where our members are based, 52 across every region of the world are recognised for Official Development Assistance (ODA) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, while those based in the Global North primarily support refugees from ODA designated countries.

We contribute to SDGs 1, 3, 5, 10, 16, & 17 to end poverty, to ensure good health and well-being, to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls, to reduce inequalities, to provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, and to revitalise global partnerships.

Our Vision

Is a world without torture. We work to ensure that individuals and communities subjected to torture receive the rehabilitation and justice, as well as other reparations, that they deserve and are entitled to.

Our Mission

Is to ensure that torture victims everywhere are able to access appropriate rehabilitation services. We are equally dedicated to fighting impunity, advancing access to justice, and preventing torture from reoccurring.
Key Challenges

#1
Torture is widespread

Despite its global prohibition, torture is reported in more than 140 countries around the world and touches the lives of hundreds of thousands of survivors and their families and communities, who need and deserve medical, psychological, legal, and socio-economic support to heal.

“As health professionals fighting against torture we must not only rehabilitate survivors but also expose torture and hold States accountable for their human rights obligations.”
— SEBNEM KORUR, President of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (HRFT).

#2
There are insufficient funds to rehabilitate survivors

The IRCT’s membership represents a significant proportion of the existing worldwide capacity to provide rehabilitation to survivors. However, the current need far outstrips available human and financial resources. Victims have a right to rehabilitation, but systemic underfunding of this sector limits the ability of IRCT members and other service providers to assist victims.

#3
Torture silences survivors

Torture stigmatises its victims. Survivors need a safe and inclusive environment from which to speak out against it. We work collectively to amplify the voices of survivors and communities, to guide their own rehabilitation as well as to demand justice, reparations and an end to the practice.

#4
Exposing torture is difficult

Although it is systematically practiced in most countries where it occurs, torture is under-reported due to fear, trauma, and stigma, among other reasons. In addition, perpetrators do everything in their power to hide it or silence victims and their communities. We use our expertise and our evidence to reveal torture.

#5
Impunity is rampant

When torture is exposed, it is challenging to hold perpetrators accountable or to compel States to undertake the reforms needed to prevent it from continuing. Perpetrators are often influential or can impede investigation, and States are often reluctant to acknowledge their accountability and act. We must build strong coalitions and employ powerful advocacy to compel justice and change.

#6
Civil society space is shrinking

Supporting torture victims and fighting for justice is often risky. Many of our members work under extremely repressive circumstances where financing is blocked, personal safety is threatened, and their work is de-legitimised. This threatens the safety and wellbeing of their staff and their clients and makes it dangerous for them to advocate for change.

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Our Strategy,
Our Strengths

As a global leader in how to investigate and document torture and rehabilitate survivors, IRCT is centrally placed to address the challenges and opportunities of today.

We Believe, IF more survivors receive effective services to help them rebuild their lives and have safe and inclusive spaces to speak out; IF torture is credibly exposed; IF national laws and policies comply with the UN Convention against Torture and international standards for rehabilitation; and IF national civil society actors and State agencies have access to effective anti-torture tools and expertise;

THEN there will be a global improvement in the lives of survivors, their rights will be strengthened, accountability for torture will increase, and local action to prevent torture from continuing will be successful.

Our strength is anchored in our work with survivors. By supporting over 50,000 torture survivors annually, we have expansive evidence of how torture and ill-treatment is being used around the world and first-hand knowledge of how it impacts individuals, their families and their communities, as well as their struggles with accessing mechanisms for justice and accountability. With 161 members in 76 countries, IRCT represents a sizeable proportion of the global activity to document torture and provide rehabilitation to survivors and is thereby the world’s leading expert in these fields.

Together with other anti-torture stakeholders - international and national civil society organisations, survivors associations, UN and regional human rights mechanisms, global and national professional health associations, national and local government agencies, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) and National Preventive Mechanisms (NPM) – we work to expose torture and achieve justice, heal victims, and fight for sustainable change in international and national laws, policies and practices to prevent torture from continuing.

We lead this coalition in advocating for more effective investigation and documentation of torture worldwide, as well as in advancing the right of victims to rehabilitation. In addition, we actively seek to enhance the work of our partners and the broader network of anti-torture stakeholders by providing our expertise to them and joining in advocacy actions. By working together and aligning our expertise and efforts, we maximize the impact of our interventions and achieve the greatest positive change. We believe this plurality is a source of strength.

People gathered at the Capitol Hill in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on May 17, 2021, to ask legislators to ban so-called conversion therapy. In 2020, the IRCT and its Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG) published reports documenting the serious psychological and physical harm caused by these practices and qualified them as a form of torture and ill-treatment. Our work has been extensively referenced by the media, civil society, experts, and religious leaders. During a panel debate at WorldPride21, Yvonne Wamari, Africa Program Officer at Outright Action International, one of the leading organisations advocating against so-called conversion therapy, observed that: “As more and more survivors and activists come forward to demand a ban on so-called conversion therapy, the IRCT’s expertise in documenting the physical and psychological harm and torture will be increasingly needed.”

Photo by Alejandro Granadillo/NurPhoto via Getty Images

“People really listen when an international group of torture documentation experts like the IRCT speaks out. What they say carries great weight both to the public and government officials and can be invaluable to spurring them to action.”

— JUAN PAPPIER, Senior Researcher for the Americas, Human Rights Watch.

THE IRCT STRATEGY
2022–25 will pursue the following two goals:

HEALING
Torture survivors receive the best possible support to rebuild their lives and have more space to make their voices heard.

JUSTICE
States improve their laws, policies and practice on justice, reparation and prevention of torture.
Goal 1. Healing

Torture survivors receive the best possible support to rebuild their lives and have more space to make their voices heard.

Torture damages the physical and psychological well-being and the socio-economic and legal situation of survivors and their families, as well as their communities. Not only does it violate their personal integrity in these ways, but, according to survivors, it also deprives them of two of the most fundamental forms of human agency, which are essential to rehabilitation: their right to livelihood, and their ability to speak out about what happened to them.

Therefore, the next four years will be driven by three core impact areas:
1.1 Capacity / 1.2 Livelihoods / 1.3 Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Survivors

1.1 Improved Rehabilitation Capacity

IRCT members will strive to grow their capacity to support all survivors who ask for help based on IRCT’s Global Standards on Rehabilitation. We will increase public and professional support for member centres and their rehabilitation work by supporting capacity exchange, increasing partnerships, and raising funds. In addition, we will enhance our exchange of experience, technical knowledge, research and skills.

“We work in communities where many people are traumatised by torture. Using the skills and knowledge we gained, we now support more than 1,000 torture survivors to rebuild their lives each year.”

— LENIN RAGHUVANSHI, Founder and CEO, PVCHR.
1.2 Better Livelihoods

For survivors facing challenging socio-economic circumstances, the IRCT and its members will advance and exchange best practices in fostering livelihoods as a key component of the rehabilitation process. By supporting survivors to develop initiatives that allow them to access a stable income, we can create a strong foundation for the healing process. Developed by survivors themselves, the livelihoods initiatives empower individuals to regain control of their and their family’s socio-economic situation, thereby restoring the agency lost during their torture experience. For many torture survivors, successful livelihoods initiatives thus present fulfilling life projects that both enable and empower them to heal.

“Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Survivors”

The IRCT will support its members to create more safe and inclusive spaces where survivors can share their experiences, take ownership of their rehabilitation and exercise their rights, including to participate in the fight for justice. The IRCT network will continue to serve as a platform to represent the experiences of survivors and work to amplify their voices in our advocacy.

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To protect our members and their ability to support torture survivors in the most difficult political and security environments, the IRCT will coordinate and support global solidarity actions to support our members when they come under political pressure. As part of this work, the IRCT will provide a platform to amplify survivor voices and experiences to keep the pressure on States to act against torture.
Goal 2. Justice

States improve their laws, policies and practice on justice, reparation and prevention of torture.

States usually deny that torture occurs and obstruct attempts to investigate it leaving victims without access to justice and reparations, including rehabilitation. While the IRCT and our civil society partners continue to succeed in advocating for improved international and national legal frameworks to address torture, implementation is often weak and inconsistent. Thus torture and impunity persist. To address this implementation gap, civil society and state institutions need to enhance their capacity, skills and resources to effectively document torture and promote accountability, reparation and prevention of torture.

Therefore, the next four years will create impact in three key areas:

2.1 Exposing Torture / 2.2 Improving Laws and Policies / 2.3 Strengthening Capacity

2.1 Exposing Torture

The IRCT will work with other leading campaigning, legal and human rights organisations to leverage forensic evidence, which can be used to expose torture and hold perpetrators accountable through public advocacy and strategic litigation. We will also focus on exposing torture practices that are widely prevalent and should be banned, such as conversion therapy, and will build strong coalitions to advance that goal. Together with our partners we will press international and national mechanisms to investigate torture and develop appropriate procedures for facilitating the participation of victims in those processes.

On 10 July 2012, Yecenia Armenta Graciano was detained, raped and tortured for 15 hours by the police in Culiacan, Mexico, until she agreed to sign a “confession” for involvement in the murder of her husband. However, an examination by the state forensics office, which the UN described as biased, found “no physical or psychological evidence” of torture. IRCT’s Independent Forensic Expert Group was asked to intervene. We examined Yecenia and documented compelling evidence of torture and the judge agreed, rejecting the state’s report as flawed. On 8 June 2016, Yecenia was freed.

“Yecenia’s case really opened our eyes to the importance of independent forensic expertise. Now, we have a network of qualified independent experts throughout Mexico, which we’ve developed with the support of IRCT.”

— CRISTIAN URBALEJO, General Coordinator, Colectivo Contra la Tortura y Impunidad (CCTI), Mexico.
2.2 Improving Laws and Policies

The IRCT will advocate with UN and regional human rights mechanisms to develop strong anti-torture standards that reflect the perspectives and experiences of survivors. We will also engage these mechanisms to increase the pressure on States to adopt and implement anti-torture laws and policies that comply with international standards. We will use their review procedures and recommendations to conduct advocacy and facilitate our national level dialogue with State agencies.

“The IRCT helped us build constructive dialogues with UN treaty bodies, which convinced them to issue strong recommendations to the Lebanese state. We now use these recommendations to advocate for a stronger anti-torture law, better safeguards in places of detention and a new National Preventive Mechanism.”

— SUZANNE JABBOUR, Director, Restart Rehabilitation Centre, Lebanon

2.3 Strengthening Capacity

The IRCT will strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations and State institutions to effectively advocate against torture and implement international accountability standards. In particular, we will develop tools and provide training and expertise on how to investigate and document violations using the Istanbul Protocol (IP), establish national rehabilitation programmes, and design victim-centred justice processes. In addition, the IRCT and our global membership will continue to advocate for the prevention of torture to remain a priority among States and for the necessary resources to be dedicated to supporting actors who provide rehabilitation to torture survivors.

“IRCT provided much needed expertise and guidance to strengthen the capacity of the Independent Investigative Panel so we can finally bring truth, justice and reparations to the generations of victims that have suffered.”

— DR. UJU AGOMOH, Executive Director, PRAWA and Member, Independent Investigation Panel on Alleged Human Rights Violations By Nigeria Police Force Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and Other Specialised Units
How We Work

SURVIVORS
The IRCT’s strategies and approaches are guided by the needs and experiences of the torture survivors who we serve. We support survivors to determine their healing journey, to share their stories to influence public opinion, and to create sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families. From this work we gain a sound and comprehensive understanding of torture practices and the impacts they make on the people in our communities and the barriers that exist to accountability in our countries.

IRCT GOVERNANCE
The IRCT is led by an Executive Committee and a Council made up of our members who are elected by the membership in a democratic process. The Executive Committee provides oversight to the organisation by ensuring accountable and strategic governance, implementation of the IRCT Strategy and cost-effective use of funds. The Council is responsible for coordination of activities and policies within the IRCT regions and providing thematic expertise to the work of the organisation.

IRCT MEMBERS
Every IRCT member provides rehabilitation to torture survivors and conducts advocacy against torture. Through the IRCT network, members exchange knowledge and experience and provide support to each other, especially in the face of political attack due to their human rights work. In particular, members develop and share new rehabilitation techniques; explore solutions to similar challenges with others from around the globe; and collect data and documentation to strengthen national and international reporting and advocacy efforts. Not least, they contribute with member fees to support the network.

IRCT SECRETARIAT
The IRCT Secretariat drives the implementation of the IRCT Strategy. The Secretariat coordinates and directs membership engagement for achieving our strategic goals and leads the organisation’s global anti-torture advocacy efforts. This includes coordinating global actions and learning exchanges, providing legal and advocacy expertise to members, intervening in strategic cases and policy processes, and advocating to increase the resources and funding available to members, the Secretariat, and others in the sector.

EXPERTS NETWORK
The work of the IRCT Secretariat is supported by a network of esteemed health, legal and human rights experts who contribute their time pro bono to advise and support our approaches and activities. These experts sit on several IRCT advisory boards and help to strengthen our work in the areas of communications and funding to rehabilitation and forensic documentation.

ifeg independent forensic expert group
Established by the IRCT in 2009, the Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG) provides forensic expertise worldwide to other civil society and human rights organisations fighting against torture by conducting forensic examinations of victims, reviewing visual and documentary evidence, issuing expert statements, developing documentation tools and resources and providing training. The IFEG has conducted interventions in over 60 countries. The group consists of 42 distinguished experts from 23 countries who collectively represent over 500 years of experience in the investigation and documentation of torture. Together, its members have examined around 40,000 alleged victims of torture, testified in courts and other forums approximately 4,600 times, published 2,400 scientific books and articles and conducted 2,000 trainings.

TORTURE
Journal on Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and Prevention of Torture
The IRCT’s Torture Journal is the world’s leading academic journal on the issue of rehabilitating torture survivors and forensic torture documentation. The Journal is peer-reviewed and provides an interdisciplinary forum for the exchange of original research and systematic reviews by professionals concerned with the biomedical, psychological and social interface of torture and the rehabilitation of its survivors. It is indexed in EBSCO and MEDLINE, which represents an international acknowledgement of the publication’s value as a leading periodic on torture and the examination and treatment of torture sequel. For 30 years, the Torture Journal has been producing state-of-the-art knowledge on methodologies, approaches and innovations in health-based action against torture.

OUR FINANCES AND OPERATIONS
The IRCT will continue to prioritise efficiency, agility and sustainability in its financing and operations so that we can respond effectively to emergency situations and changing geopolitical environments.

The IRCT prioritises a slim Secretariat and will further diversify our funding base aiming to secure EUR 2m annually for the implementation of this Strategy. We will use financial scenario building as a tool to increase agility in responding to new funding opportunities and developments. Our work is supported by several governments, in particular the Danish and the Swiss Ministries of Foreign Affairs, foundations, including Sigrid Rausing Trust, ATSF and Novo Nordisk Foundation, by voluntary contributions from members and private individuals, and the pro bono support of health, forensic and human rights experts.

The IRCT operates on the principle of cost-effectiveness and climate change awareness. We will implement this Strategy and manage funds using transparent and accountable systems. In addition, we will expand our digital working methodologies to widen our global reach, promote equal access and effective networking, and reduce operational costs and per capita carbon emissions. During the period of this Strategy, the IRCT will endeavor to join the UN Race to Zero, the global campaign to align organisations, cities and investors with the internationally agreed target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.