

## One Legacy Among Many: The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights at 21

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One of the many responses to acts of terror at the University of Central American José Simeon Cañas on November 16, 1989, which included the brutal assassination of my colleague and friend Ignacio Martín-Baró, was the establishment of *The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights*. Colleagues in North America asked themselves what they—psychological researchers, teachers and practitioners in the North, and citizens of countries that regularly support oppressive forces in the majority world—had to contribute to the healing of local survivors after such gross violations of human rights. The Fund emerged as a modest answer to our outrage and loss, reflecting one response to Martín-Baró's challenge that a liberation psychology include the construction of "a new person in a new society." This article reflects upon 21 years of fundraising, grant making, education, and advocacy by those who have sustained the Martín-Baró Fund, seeking to illuminate key elements of community-based psychological praxis through selected projects supported by the Fund. Including some key contributions from Martín-Baró's writings, it explores selected ideas toward the praxis of a liberatory psychology in contexts of armed conflict—and concludes with a discussion of the limitations that continue to challenge the Fund.

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[T]he deterioration of social interaction [in war] is in and of itself a serious social disturbance, an erosion of our collective capacity to work and love, to assert our unique identity, to tell our personal and communal story in the history of peoples . . . . For this reason, the challenge is not limited to addressing the destruction and disorders caused by the war. The challenge is to construct a new person in a new society. (Martín-Baró, 1994, pp. 115, 121)

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. (Grenoble, cited in Manning, 1989, p. 7)

On the morning of November 16, 1989, Boston College psychologist Ramsay Liem and I, along with a dozen colleagues from the greater

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THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES the collaborative work of many people who have contributed in countless ways to the work of the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights. There are no words to adequately acknowledge the work of our grantees—and the many whose work

we were unable to support given our limited resources. The Fund has opened a window onto some of the many ways in which local communities and grassroots or community-based organizations struggle against repression, violence, and structural inequality to create "a new person in a new society." All of us at the Fund have benefited enormously from your work and your willingness to share it with us through the partnerships we have crafted. Many of the ideas reflected in this article have been discussed at length with volunteers of the Fund; particular thanks go to Ramsay Liem and Ben Achtenberg with whom I collaborated on an earlier unpublished piece about the Fund from which I have drawn for this work.

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Boston area, were scheduled to log on to an experimental Internet conference to discuss the hidden psychological injuries of war and state-sponsored violence. Also participating were colleagues in Chile and Argentina, and from the University of Central America in El Salvador was Ignacio “Nacho” Martín-Baró, a colleague and friend who had visited the United States earlier that year. He and I first met in Cuba at the InterAmerican Psychological Association (SIP) meetings in 1987 and gathered again to launch a Network in Communication and Documentation in Mental Health and Human Rights (hereafter referred to as the Network) in Argentina after the 1989 SIP. We sought to add a new direction to the circulation of psychological research and practice—work that usually travels from North to South—by abstracting Spanish-language articles from Latin America and the Caribbean and making them more widely available in the North. To that end we agreed to produce a series of annotated bibliographies highlighting many of the excellent publications and unpublished resources produced in Mexico and Latin America (see, e.g., Lykes & Fariña, 1992). The scheduled conference on November 16th would be the Network’s first “cyber” exchange.

On our way to the campus that morning, we received the shocking news via radio that Nacho, along with five of his Jesuit brothers, their housekeeper, and the housekeeper’s daughter, had been brutally murdered by soldiers of El Salvador’s U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion. At the time of his murder, Martín-Baró, a social psychologist, was the Vice-Rector of the UCA and Director of its Center for Public Opinion. A renowned scholar and author, Martín-Baró was born in Spain and had studied in Europe and the United States but considered El Salvador his adopted country. Working and living among the Salvadoran people, he dedicated his life to the cause of human rights, equality, social justice, and to healing the individual and collective scars of war and oppression.

Confronted by the news of the UCA murders, the Network of psychologists and mental health workers in the United States, Chile, and Argentina shifted focus dramatically. We in the U.S. asked ourselves what we, citizens of a country that regularly supports oppressive forces in the majority world, have to contribute to the healing of survivors after acts of terror such as the

violent assault at the University of Central American Jose Simeon Cañas. Mourning the loss of a colleague and friend, we began organizing our responses, contacting colleagues in national and international organizations, as well as protesting U.S. involvement in El Salvador and its ongoing role in training the Atlacatl Battalion for assault and murder against civilian populations.

### **The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights at 21**

The Fund emerged as a modest response to outrage and loss. This article documents selected actions over the last 21 years by volunteers within the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights that represent one of many efforts across the globe to extend the reach of Nacho’s life and work.

### **Who We Are**

At the time of his murder, Ignacio’s ideas on the roles of history and sociality in reconfiguring dominant individualistic understandings of mental health and illness were not well known beyond a growing circle of Spanish-speaking psychologists. Equally little known were his theories about the polarization and rupture of social relations as central consequences of war and the need for psychologists to “change [ ] the lens and see mental health or illness not from the inside out but from the outside in; not as the result of an individual’s internal functioning but as the manifestation, in a person or group, of the humanizing or alienating character of a framework of historical relationships” (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 111).

Some U.S. members in the Network heard his ideas for the first time in Cuba in 1987 and again in Argentina in 1989. They converged with ideas “on the margins” of mainstream psychology, in community psychology and social psychiatry. For example, social psychologist William Ryan had published the widely read critique of psychologists’ tendencies to reduce complex social phenomena to individual psychological ills, *Blaming the Victim* (1971). Echoing Ryan’s analyses, George Albee (1988) wrote that “people without power are commonly exploited by powerful economic groups who explain the resulting psychopathology by

pointing to the inborn defects in the victims” (p. 208). He suggested that the most effective way to alleviate feelings of powerlessness when working with people marginalized from power is to “encourage efforts at altering reality” (p. 209). Paradoxically, nearly all mental health funding in the United States at the time supported individual therapy, rather than community interventions and prevention, despite the evidence that widespread mental health problems were rarely if ever eliminated by individual treatment.

Thus the work we were discovering through Ignacio echoed our own experiences at the margins of psychological theory and practice in the United States. As importantly, it more accurately reflected the lived experiences of many of the people of color, women, and Central Americans seeking refuge in the United States with whom we were collaborating in clinical, educational, and research endeavors. With his writings about the psychological consequences of armed conflict for peasants in El Salvador, Martín-Baró and other psychologists working in zones of armed conflict with survivors of trauma and torture extended these critiques, challenging an individualistic medical model which failed to understand either the historical roots of or the collective situatedness of psychosocial trauma (See also Summerfield, 1995).

Ignacio’s murder in 1989 cut short our developing collaborations. In response we established the Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights in hopes of furthering some of the goals to which he had dedicated his life and to honor his memory. We launched the Fund to partner with grassroots community-based workers who sought not only to collaborate with survivors of war in responding to its psychosocial effects but also to support their efforts to rebuild community ties and transform social structures, that is, to create a new person, a new society. The Fund seeks to support groups in challenging institutional repression and confronting the mental health consequences of violence and injustice and also to educate ourselves and other potential donors about the underlying root causes of this violence, including critiquing the role of U.S. policies and practices in perpetrating violence and human rights violations in countries of the majority world and within our own borders.

## **Our Mission**

The Fund’s mission is to foster psychological well-being, social consciousness, and active resistance in communities affected by institutional violence, repression, and social injustice. We believe that the scars of such experiences are deeply seated in both the individual and society, and therefore we seek to support projects that explore the power of community to collectively heal these wounds and move forward.

Through grants, networking, and technical support, the Fund seeks to encourage the development of innovative grassroots community projects that promote progressive social change and community mental health. In pursuit of this mission, the Fund’s goals are as follows:

1. To develop a holistic perspective for understanding the connections between state and institutional violence and repression, and the mental health of communities and individuals;
2. To support innovative projects that explore the power of community to foster healing within individuals and communities trying to recover from experiences of institutional violence, repression, and social injustice;
3. To build collaborative relationships among the Fund, its grantees, and its contributors for mutual education and empowerment; and
4. To develop social consciousness within the United States regarding the psychological consequences of structural violence, repression, and social injustice.

## **Grant Making Processes**

To date, the Fund has supported 127 projects directed by 67 organizations with small grants ranging from \$2,500 in our early years to approximately \$7,000 in 2011, totaling more than \$750,000 dollars. Although we have funded projects throughout the world, 72 (56%) of the grants have been given to groups in México and Central and South America. The majority of these have been in Guatemala (22 projects), with El Salvador and México receiving support for 16 projects each. Additionally, the Philippines has received support for 22 projects. Each

of these countries has survived decades of civil war; thousands of disappearances, murders, and massacres; the displacement of millions of survivors; and, most recently in México, horrific violence resulting from drug trafficking. These conflicts have been financed in large part by U.S. tax dollars and carried out by military trained at U.S. military schools.

Seeking to better understand the realities in the countries in which projects are located, we ask applicants to identify the root causes of the psychosocial and human rights issues they seek to address with a grant from the Fund. A recent analysis of the applications of the 127 projects funded to date yielded specific references to the U.S. government in approximately 10% of the project proposals. For example, a group of indigenous activists in the United States spoke about U.S. government policies designed to re-educate Native American children in Euro American schools off the reserves, while another group on the border described the racialization of immigrants seeking a better life across the U.S.–Mexico border. Proposals from Nicaragua, Mexico, and the Philippines spoke of the direct effects of U.S. foreign policy on their country's poor, while an application from Haiti, which sought funding to offer peer support groups and reflection circles for women survivors of rape by military and police in the Port-au-Prince area, described U.S. foreign policy as having "done much to undermine respect for human rights and Haiti's democratic transition. The U.S. has historically supported military dictatorships . . . and withheld diplomatic support from democratically elected governments in Haiti. The U.S. has financed, equipped, and armed the brutal Haitian National Police as rights groups have continued to document numerous executions and massacres by the police force." Christians for Peace in El Salvador (CRISPAZ) sought funding for a prisoner support group, OPERA, a Spanish acronym whose initials stand for Optimism, Peace, Hope, Renewal and Harmony. The application noted that the United States' continuing postwar contributions of billions of dollars to support the government and military in El Salvador feeds and helps sustain a corrupt judicial system, a climate of fear and violence, and severe damage to the country's infrastructure. Despite these analyses implicating the U.S. government in repressive actions, the majority of applicants pointed to

their own governments and/or ongoing armed conflicts in their own countries as the main source of violence or repression.

Through partnerships with these groups and ongoing efforts to seek additional information about them from other political and academic resources, members of the Fund educate ourselves and the wider U.S. population about what governments are doing "in our names." The project partners infuse historical and academic knowledge with voices and action "on the ground," thus facilitating a deeper knowledge construction process "from the bottom up."

### **Exploring a Liberating Psychology Through the Work of Two Groups Supported by the Martín-Baró Fund**

*The Association of Maya Ixil Women – New Dawn (ADMI) and the Center for Mayan Ixil Education and Development (ACEFOMI) are projects in rural Guatemala which the Fund has supported through multiple grants. Initially formed as a small Women's Committee in the early 1990s, they are now nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with members located in the rural town of Chajul and in some of its surrounding villages. Since the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency helped to topple the democratically elected government of Guatemalan president, Jacobo Arbenz, in 1954, the United States has supported a series of military dictatorships which have been responsible for atrocities against the Maya, most specifically during 36 years of civil war that ended in 1996. Many Mayan women who were widowed and left to care for their families have also been excluded from most social benefits: more than 85% live in extreme poverty, and 60% are illiterate.*

In 1994, ADMI submitted a novel proposal to the Fund. They argued that to improve the mental health of their community they needed to become economically self-sufficient—to generate income to build a better future for themselves and their children. They proposed to build and operate a corn mill for their community, the first such woman-operated business in the region. The mill would enhance their leadership within the community, generate funds for subsistence, and support a children's educational program, thereby facilitating the reintegration of returning refugees and displaced peo-

ple in this rural community in the midst of the then ongoing war.

Moving from idea to reality was a multiple-year process. To work through the fears and anxieties generated by their assumption of leadership, the women participated in a series of workshops using drawing, dramatization, and creative play (See Lykes, 1994, for a description of these creative techniques). As a member of the Fund and a community cultural psychologist with previous experiences working with Mayan women and children, I had been invited to join their women's group as a consultant and facilitator. Through dramatic multiplications, the workshops became a context for mutual support, offering opportunities to explore not only current fears but long-silenced effects of massacres and violations of human rights from the war. ADMI went on to develop a series of educational and economic development programs for the women and children of Chajul (see Lykes et al., 1999, for details).

As ADMI consolidated their position in the community, they perceived a need to document their stories and those of families in the neighboring villages—to testify to the horrors of war, but also to speak about their traditions as Mayan women, and how they had responded to the effects of war. In collaboration with me, they developed a project integrating photography and storytelling to document the stories of families who had survived massacres and taken refuge in the surrounding mountains. The resultant PhotoPAR project contributed to, among other outcomes, the publication of *Voices and Images: Mayan Ixil Women of Chajul* (Women of PhotoVoice/ADMI & Lykes, 2000).

In the wake of this multi-year project ADMI began to attract financial support from other organizations to support its children's work and to build a center to house its multiple programs. However, continuing impunity, ongoing poverty, and community-based violence in Guatemala's postconflict transitions affected many local organizations, including ADMI, which experienced increasing internal challenges. Ethnic and social class tensions as well as ongoing differences among evangelical Christian women, traditionalist or Mayanists, and Catholics and among those who had sided with conflicting forces during the war or different political parties in the postconflict period contributed to ADMI's split into two organiza-

tions. Some of the women from the PhotoPAR project initiated a *Center for Mayan Ixil Education and Development* (ACEFOMI). A year later this group applied to the Martín-Baró Fund for support to develop mental health workshops for women living in five villages whom they had met while creating *Voices and Images*. This new initiative was undertaken both to share experiences based on their own lives and to facilitate the development of women's organizations in the villages.

In one psychosocial workshop which I had the opportunity to observe, 22 women gathered in a small schoolroom, the only public meeting space in the town, for a workshop focusing on their experiences of poverty. A few of the women described their struggles to survive by selling weavings, collecting and reselling used clothing, or raising chickens. Others had been forced to work on nearby plantations or to migrate to the South Coast—only to return after a season of work with debts, not income. They spoke of the sadness with which they awaken each morning, knowing that they cannot support their children with their limited earnings.

The ACEFOMI coordinator invited the women to work in small groups to assemble puzzle pieces forming the image of an insect or animal, and then to talk about the positive and negative characteristics of each creature: The cat scratches children and can be a nuisance, but it is quick and always captures what it hunts. The ant causes sorrow when it bites someone or destroys crops, but its strong system of mutual support enables it to both build and destroy. The facilitator contributed traditional tales about these animals, from Mayan folklore, and led the women in applying the characteristics they had identified in their insects or animals to their own lives. One woman compared her search for basic necessities to the cat's agile hunting. Another compared the women's need for community organization to the cooperative strategies used by bees and ants. The Mayan facilitator shuttled between traditional beliefs and contemporary problems, helping the women to rediscover their own and their community's strengths and traditions. The workshop was a context for learning, as one woman said, how to "suffer less from the past."

*The Children's Rehabilitation Center (CRC)* in Quezon City, the Philippines, has received

several grants from the Martín-Baró Fund, the earliest in the mid-1990s. In contrast to the work in Guatemala, wherein the only professionals were those who served as consultants for relatively brief periods of time, the CRC was formed by a partnership among dedicated mental health professionals, volunteers, and grassroots activists during the worst years of counterinsurgency against popular movements in the Philippines. It has worked with children victimized by war, disappearances, and unrelenting poverty for more than two decades. These conditions have been abetted by policies of virtually every U.S. administration for the past 100 years, which have supported the suppression of people's liberation movements and struggles for autonomy in Muslim regions of the country.

The CRC's mission, described on its web page, is to: "[f]acilitate psychosocial help primarily for children in war and secondarily for children survivors of social and natural disasters as well as victims of sexual abuse at the grassroots and community level in order to lay the groundwork for people's initiative, creativity, responsibility and communal concern for children" (<http://www.childrehabcenter.org/about>). Among its many initiatives is a program called *Children Braving the Storm: A Service-Advocacy Campaign for the Children of Mindanao and Payatas*. It was launched in response to the devastating impact on children of the country's increasing militarization, its deteriorating economy, and the extreme poverty experienced by millions of squatters and relocatees in Manila and its surrounding area. Some of the children CRC works with have been dislocated by an intensified military campaign (code name Oplan Makabayan) against the Muslim Moro people of Mindanao. Others are coping with the aftermath of the collapse of the gigantic Payatas Dumpsite that killed nearly 300 people in Quezon City and buried almost 500 households whose livelihoods depended on scavenging in the midst of Manila's wealth and privilege. The Martín Baró Fund has supported these and more recent components of the CRC's work.

*Children Braving the Storm* is a multi-pronged campaign designed to help children recover from emotional shock, to make sense of their experience and, most remarkably, to become advocates for other children facing similar assaults. Through individual and group activities involving play, artwork, storytelling, and

drama, the campaign helps the children achieve the following:

1. Identify, express, and associate their feelings and opinions to ideas with their traumatic experiences, and reengage the spirit of childhood;
2. Identify the causes of their experience, while discovering their personal strengths, limitations, and social supports to explore new options for coping;
3. Effectively verbalize and handle their feelings, anticipate future crises, and recover the usual routines of childhood; and
4. Develop the capacity to advocate for their rights by increasing their knowledge and skills in areas of personal interest like theater arts, visual arts, writing, and public speaking.

The component of this program that best exemplifies the mission of the Martín-Baró Fund, however, is the *Children's Collective*, which visits schools to speak with students and teachers about human rights abuses; writes, produces, and performs plays that make visible the experiences of young people assaulted by war and poverty; and participates in public rallies to denounce human rights violations. The young people of the Children's Collective joined the Women and Children's March against Poverty and Violence and performed their play *Batang Pangarap (Child of Dreams)* during celebrations of Women's Family Day.

### **Support of the Fund Through U.S. Partnerships**

The Martín-Baró Fund is able to raise funds and transfer them to these community-based and grassroots projects in part because of a partnership with *The Funding Exchange* (<http://fex.org/>), a unique organization through which activists and donors have built a base of support for progressive social change, through fundraising for local, national, and international grant-making programs. While traditional charities generally respond to the symptoms of entrenched social problems, the Funding Exchange and its network of community funds throughout the United States support organizations that identify underlying causes, work to change these conditions, and build national and

international social movements. They are widely respected for their commitment, in their own words, to “change, not charity.”

After nearly two decades as a volunteer-run and funded organization, the Fund has moved its educational programming and fundraising activities to the Center for Human Rights and International Justice (CHRIJ) at Boston College. This decision was made in the hopes of strengthening institutional ties with a Jesuit university-based human rights organization that shares many of the commitments of the Fund while developing a new generation of scholars and activists to carry the vision and mission of the Fund into the 21st century. As part of this transition—and the commemoration of 20 years since the brutal assassination of Ignacio—the CHRIJ and the Fund cohosted a panel of distinguished guests from El Salvador, Chile, and the United States and premiered a 20th anniversary film *A New Person, A New Society: A Human Rights Legacy of Ignacio Martín-Baró*, which features three of our grantees, including two described briefly above (see <http://www.martinbarofund.org/about/videos.html>).

### Revisiting the Challenges of Martín-Baró’s Legacy

By putting the concept of “*the people*” in a historical context, we affirm the particulars, in terms of space, [and] time . . . . *The people* is, in this sense, a fact, but, above all, a challenge and a hope: the truth of the people is in the making . . . . Because historically *the people* is called upon to be—to be itself—it must overcome its servitude, and must eliminate everything that stands in the way of its becoming itself . . . . There are no ready-made models or miracle pills; each people must go about liberating itself, taking responsibility for its own history (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 178).

The projects receiving grants from the Fund go to the heart of the Fund’s mission to support creative grassroots efforts that foster mental health by engaging survivors and their communities in attacking the societal roots of human rights abuses as part of the process of recovery. The Children Braving the Storm campaign of the CRC, ADMI’s corn mill at the interface of economic development and mental health and its subsequent PhotoPAR documentation project, and ACEFOMI’s creative workshops that fuse Mayan traditions, gender rights, and creativity as resources for women’s self-advocacy exemplify such work. They also go to the heart

of our understanding of Ignacio’s challenges to psychology—that it liberate itself from positivist and individualist tendencies and reroot itself within the daily toil of the majority population, of *the people*, who situate themselves historically, in the present, and toward the future.

The work supported by the Fund reflects a small number of the thousands of grassroots or community-based efforts to respond to the effects of extreme poverty, armed conflict, environmental disasters, and the expropriation of indigenous peoples’ lands by multinational corporations in the global North. Through engagement with these projects and reflecting upon the materials that they have shared with us, we have learned about how state and global structures undermine mental health and how individuals and communities are deeply fractured by these diverse forms of violence. We have also learned how individuals-in-communities are actively engaging, repairing, and resisting the root causes of these violations.

### Limitations of the Fund as We Enter Our Next Decade

Despite periodic opportunities for face-to-face dialogue with our grantees, we recognize the limits of our efforts to foster a liberatory psychology reflective of Nacho’s vision, at least in part because of our all-volunteer staff and our scale. Because our fundraising efforts have been similarly community-based and small scale, we are unable to give grants to many of the programs and projects that seek our support. As significantly, we regularly make decisions to limit grant making to areas of the world where we have sufficient expertise to evaluate the proposals and engage in good stewardship of the resources entrusted to us. We discovered through several brief forays into hiring paid staff that we were not able to sustain fundraising at a level which would enable us to maintain such arrangements and continue to support grantees at the level to which we had become accustomed. Thus, we returned to a volunteer staff and moved some of our work to the university. There we have secured some resources for student assistance as well as the enthusiasm and energy of students, faculty, and staff who are now collaborating in the work of the Fund.

Our work has been sustained by the expertise of our founders—academic psychologists and

mental health practitioners—and others from a variety of other fields who have brought their experience, skills, and interests to enhance the work of the Fund. We strive to sustain our connections to the life and legacy of our friend and colleague, Ignacio Martín-Baró, while remaining open to the contributions and challenges of a new generation of activists, scholars, and mental health practitioners.

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