

This article was prepared by Ramsay Liem, M. Brinton Lykes, and Ben Achtenberg. It was written as a chapter for a forthcoming book tentatively entitled: "Uncommon Good: An Anthology of Innovative Organizations, Institutes, and Groups of People Working to Promote Quality of Life and Create Positive Change," currently being edited by Daniel Holland, PhD, MPH, of the Department of Psychology, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights

To construct a new person in a new society...

"Whether or not it manifests in individual disorders, the deterioration of social interaction [by 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."

— Ignacio Martín-Baró

Background: On the morning of November 16, 1989, Boston College psychologists M. Brinton Lykes and Ramsay Liem, with a dozen colleagues from the greater Boston area, were scheduled to log onto an experimental internet conference dealing with the hidden psychological injuries of war and state-sponsored violence. Also participating, from the University of Central America in El Salvador, would be Jesuit Father Ignacio Martín-Baró, a colleague and friend who had visited the United States earlier that year.

Listening to the radio on their way to the campus, Lykes and Liem instead received the shocking news that "Father 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 death, 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 El Salvador was his adopted country. Working and living among the Salvadoran people, he dedicated his life to the cause of human rights, equality, and 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 mental health workers in the U.S., Chile, and Argentina shifted their focus dramatically, to mourning the loss of a colleague and friend and to organizing a response. The idea for our Fund emerged from these early discussions.

Who We Are: The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights was established by members of the Network gathered on November 16, 1989, to further the goals to which Ignacio dedicated his life, and to honor his memory. There was little recognition among human rights activists at that time of the psychosocial effects of war, and no economic support for grassroots community-based work that sought not only to

heal the wounds of war, but to rebuild community ties and social structures. The Fund would seek not only to support progressive groups throughout the world in challenging institutional repression and confronting the mental health consequences of violence and injustice, but also to educate ourselves and other potential donors about the existence and importance of this work.

Since its inception, the Fund has made more than a hundred grants totaling more than a half million dollars. Although we have supported projects throughout the world, more than twenty-five percent of our grants have been to organizations in Central America or México. The majority of these have been in Guatemala and in El Salvador, countries that have survived decades of civil war; thousands of disappearances, murders, and massacres; and the displacement of millions of survivors. These conflicts have been financed in large part by U.S. tax dollars, and many of the military responsible for brutality were trained in the U.S. or by U.S. military personnel. One of the ongoing concerns of the members of the Fund has been to educate ourselves and the wider U.S. population about what our government has been doing “in our names.”

At the present time, the Fund is entirely run by our volunteer Program Committee. While many of our founders were academic psychologists and mental health practitioners, over the years, individuals from a variety of other fields have brought their experience, skills, and interests to enhance the work of the Fund, and it has also been strengthened by the energy and enthusiasm of a number of student members.

The Martín-Baró Fund is a special project of The Funding Exchange, a unique partnership of activists and donors dedicated to building 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 network supports those who identify underlying causes and work to change these conditions.

Our Mission: The Martín-Baró Fund was created 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 seek to support projects that explore the power of community to collectively heal these wounds and to move forward. As an organization based in the United States, we have a special responsibility to support groups in regions harmed by U.S. policies, and addressing problems created or aggravated by those policies.

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:

- To develop a holistic perspective for understanding the connections between state and institutional violence and repression, and the mental health of communities and individuals;
- 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;
- To build collaborative relationships among the Fund, its grantees, and its contributors for mutual education and empowerment; and
- To develop social consciousness within the United States regarding the psychological consequences of structural violence, repression, and social injustice.

Examples of Groups Supported by the Martín-Baró Fund:

The Association of Maya Ixil Women – New Dawn (ADMI), is a project which we have supported through several grants since it formed as a small Women's Committee in the early 1990s. It is now an NGO with over 120 members, located in rural Chajul, Guatemala. Since the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency helped to topple the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, the US government has supported a series of military dictatorships which have been responsible for atrocities against the Maya during the thirty-six years of civil war that ended in 1996. Many Mayan women were widowed and left to care for their families alone. Mayan women 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 re-integration of returning refugees and displaced people 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 engaged in a series of workshops in which they used drawing, dramatization, and creative play. These workshops also became opportunities to explore some of the multiple effects of the war and a context for offering mutual support. ADMI went on to develop a series of educational and economic development programs for the women and children of Chajul.

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 M. Brinton Lykes, a member of the Fund and a community-social psychologist, 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 project resulted in a photo-text, *Voices and Images: Mayan Ixil Women of Chajul*, published by MagnaTerra in Guatemala in 2000.

Last year ADMI asked 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*. ADMI’s new initiative was undertaken both to share experiences based on their own lives, and to facilitate the development of the village women’s organizations.

In one psychosocial workshop which Lykes had the opportunity to observe, twenty-two women gathered in a small schoolroom, the only public meeting space in the town. The topic for the day was 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 ADMI 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 their characteristics

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. Formed by dedicated mental health professionals, volunteers, and activists during the worst years of counterinsurgency against popular movements in the Philippines, for over a decade and a half it has worked with children victimized by war, disappearances, and unrelenting poverty. 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.

Most recently, the CRC has developed 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 both components of the CRC's work in previous years, but our current grant is in support of the program's work with the children of Payatas.

Children Braving the Storm is a multi-pronged campaign 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:

- 1) Identify and express their feelings and opinions, associate these feelings and 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, in order to explore new options for coping;
- 3) Effectively verbalize and handle their feelings, anticipate future crises, and recover the usual routines of childhood;

- 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. Recently, for example, 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.

“Psychosocial trauma...constitutes the concrete crystallization in individuals of aberrant and dehumanizing social relations like those prevalent in the situation of civil war...(which) especially affect children who must construct their identities and develop their lives within the network of these dehumanizing relations...Therefore, we cannot be satisfied with treating post-traumatic stress...it is of primary importance that treatment address itself to relationships between social groups, which constitute the “normal abnormality” that dehumanizes the...oppressor and the oppressed, soldier and victim, dominator and dominated, alike.”

— Ignacio Martín-Baró

The remarkable work of the Children Braving the Storm campaign, and of ADMI's creative workshops, go to the heart of the MBF agenda to support creative grassroots efforts that foster mental health by engaging victims and communities in attacking the societal roots of human rights abuses as part of the process of recovery. We have learned a great deal from both projects – and from many others – about how state and global structures undermine mental health and what individuals and communities can do to repair and resist.

The Future of the Fund: Sustaining and developing the work of the Martín-Baró Fund, while intensely rewarding, has also been extremely challenging. The “people power” available to handle fundraising, grant-making, public education, and local events can be unpredictable from year to year since, aside from the fiscal management support we receive from the Funding Exchange, we are an entirely volunteer organization. And for our handful of long-term members, the prospects of moving into our fifteenth year can at times feel daunting and exhausting.

Our staffing concerns are compounded by a perennial desire to expand our work: for example, by deepening our knowledge of the work of grantees and the political contexts in which they labor, providing more technical and networking sup-

port, and increasing public education and solidarity initiatives. As the Fund has gained visibility through word of mouth, through our website, and through citations in human rights, development, and funding publications, we have also faced increasing numbers of applications from virtually all areas of the globe. While gratifying, this response has taxed not only our limited financial resources but our ability to make sound decisions given the difficulty of understanding the extremely complicated and changing social and political conditions in so many different parts of the world. We are further challenged by having to translate the intent and substance of proposals which reflect many different cultural perspectives and levels of grant writing sophistication. As a result, we are constantly reviewing our own understanding of mental health, human rights, and state-sponsored violence in order to increase our confidence that our funding decisions are sound. These experiences, among others, have convinced us that no single set of definitions can be applied globally and that some degree of ambiguity is inevitable in this kind of work.

As a maturing organization, the MBF faces major challenges as it pursues its second decade of work. But, as in the past, we are confident that the political, humanitarian, and activist commitments of our members and the conviction that social justice often requires community and personal healing will enable us to meet them creatively and effectively.

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