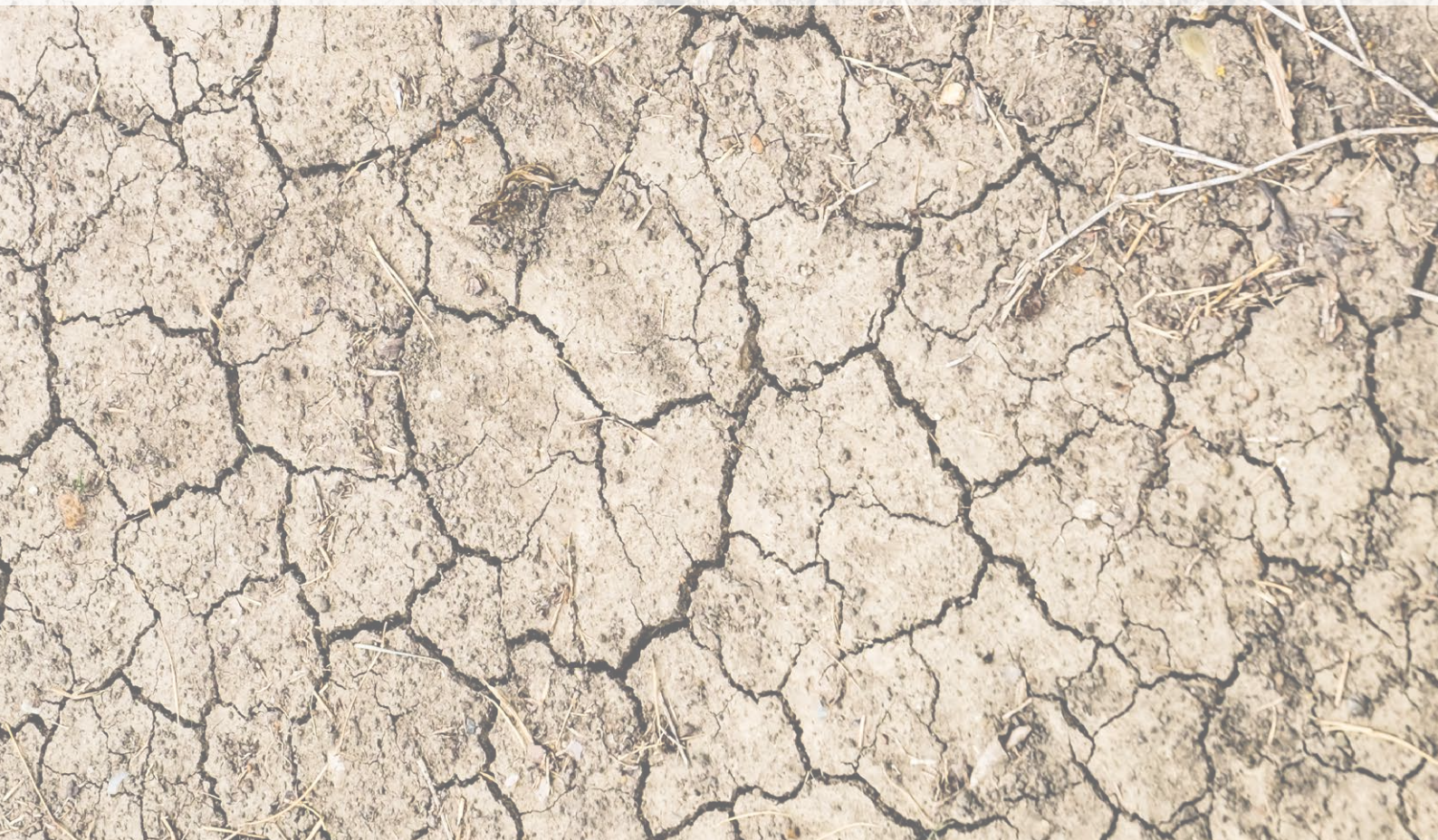
Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice

CSVR
Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

Lessons from Practice

Jasmina Brankovic



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This initiative to design and implement the first explicitly transitional justice process for addressing climate harms is the collaborative work of many people. I am grateful to the residents of Newcastle and Dannhauser, South Africa, for coming together to share their knowledge and co-create a bold set of measures; Tsholofelo Nakedi, Amina Mwaikambo and Zanele Zondo of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation for creating enabling spaces for reflection and creativity, while applying their expertise in community advocacy and mental health and psychosocial support; community facilitators Sibongile Ngema, Thandeka Buthelezi and Themba Khumalo for gathering residents, guiding the process and connecting the initiative with influential stakeholders in the area; Teresa Abel, Wilifrida John and Lesego Sekhu for their facilitation, documentation and research assistance; and Wandile Kubheka of Sobs Digital Productions for capturing the work.

For more publications, photographs and videos about the initiative, visit **https://www.csvr.org.za/transformative-transitional-justice-for-climate-justice**.

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Introduction

In 2025, two South African communities created the first explicitly transitional justice process for climate harms. Emphasising the experiences and solutions of residents directly affected by climate change, the process was also novel in using a transformative approach to transitional justice. Participants developed measures that demonstrate a more comprehensive way of conceptualising the effects of climate change – as a wide range of profound and long-lasting harms, rooted in and exacerbating structural inequalities – and of responding to them in backwards-looking and forward-looking ways that enable deeper social change. As such, this transformative transitional justice process represents a new methodology and opens fresh pathways towards climate justice, which bridge the local and the global.

The goal is to honour the memories of the loved ones who lost their lives due to climate change and to educate the communities about climate change and to preserve the nature.

– Nontuthuzelo Moeketsi

This initiative was born of the recognition that while international climate negotiations are caught at a near impasse, those least responsible for carbon emissions continue to experience the worst climate impacts and harms. In this context, the field of transitional justice offers ideas and practices for thinking 'outside the box' about addressing climate challenges. Through mechanisms such as truth commissions, reparations, prosecutions and institutional reforms, transitional justice has become a go-to solution for dealing with harms in diverse transitional contexts. Moreover, lessons learnt from 40 years of practice have given rise to transformative approaches, consisting of contextualised, bottom-up measures that address the historical and ongoing injustices that tend to underpin harms. The overlaps between transformative transitional justice and climate justice represent an opportunity to revitalise climate action.

Like many communities in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, Newcastle and Dannhauser have been wracked by severe flooding, extreme heat and droughts caused by changing weather patterns. Guided by a participatory ethos, more than 75 residents came together to co-design a set of transitional justice measures to address the resulting climate harms, in collaboration with Tsholofelo Nakedi, Amina Mwaikambo, Zanele Zondo and me from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), and local community facilitators Sibongile Ngema, Thandeka Buthelezi and Themba Khumalo.

The process we developed consisted of four measures: a truth-telling process on climate harms experiences, causes and solutions; a commemoration event for past climate harms, combined with an educational workshop on future climate change responses; the design and construction of a physical memorial honouring all those affected by climate harms; and reform-focused advocacy for participatory climate change response planning and implementation at the municipal level.

Documenting the measures, their outcomes and the lessons learnt, this report shows what transformative transitional justice for climate harms can look like in practice, both for communities affected by climate harms and for practitioners and other stakeholders working towards transitional and climate justice. I propose that such a bottom-up process can complement and strengthen top-down national and international efforts, as well as serve as a discrete form of justice in transition itself.

The report begins by outlining the value that transitional justice adds to climate action, particularly in an enabling legal and policy environment such as South Africa's, before discussing its transformative potential, including through cross-pollination of ideas and practices at the local, national, regional and international levels. The report presents the steps we took in our initiative, including a collective mapping of climate harms and solutions, a collaborative design process bolstered by mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and arts-based facilitation, and the co-implementation of the four measures, which required adaptability in the face of emerging challenges.

Following this, the report turns to findings we gleaned from the initiative. After examining participants' understandings of the international, national and local causes of climate change, the report discusses the manifold – yet often publicly invisible – harms they and other residents have experienced through loss of life, homes, belongings, livelihoods, food security, education, infrastructure, personal security, physical health, mental health, and cultural and spiritual practices. It outlines the existing and envisioned solutions they shared, which range from bottom-up international climate action and participatory local government climate action to climate-wise practices, multisectoral knowledge exchange, and MHPSS efforts.

The report concludes with lessons learnt from the practice of transformative transitional justice for climate harms, for affected communities and practitioners exploring new and locally led ways to address climate change.

Note: All the images and participant quotes in this publication are from the transformative transitional justice process we undertook in Newcastle and Dannhauser. More images are available at **https://www.csvr.org.za/transformative-transitional-justice-for-climate-justice**

Linking Transitional and Climate Justice

Transformative transitional justice opens new avenues to climate justice. This section discusses the principles and practices underpinning transformative approaches to transitional justice and the value they bring to addressing climate harms. Outlining the national and local frameworks guiding climate change responses in Newcastle and Dannhauser, the section emphasises the enabling conditions for participatory climate action in the area, which combine transitional and climate justice through backwards- and forward-looking measures. It concludes with a discussion of the degree of transformation the process we implemented could and has enabled.

Our Approach

Since the late 1980s, transitional justice processes have become a norm in countries transitioning out of authoritarianism or war to deal with systematic harms of the past, as well as more consolidated democracies seeking to address legacies of colonialism or slavery. While the field is currently facing setbacks and efforts to delegitimise it, transitional justice processes continue to be implemented in countries across the world and by regional and international institutions. With its set of commonly accepted mechanisms – truth commissions, reparations, prosecutions and institutional reforms – the field is designed to recover the truth of how past harms were committed and which conditions enabled them; provide multifaceted redress to those affected; identify and hold accountable those who perpetrated and enabled the harms; and create an environment that acknowledges past harms and deters future harms.[1]

Some elderly people live alone at home and no longer have people to help them. If this happens, their house might be blown away or water might enter their house, and the elderly no longer have people to rush them to a place like the hospital or move them to where they can be safe. We are losing people, people are dying.

– Phumlani Gule

As these mechanisms were tested and adapted in different contexts, critiques of mainstream practice and scholarship resulted in the development of transformative approaches to transitional justice. Informed by the experiences of practitioners and victims and survivors, primarily in Africa and elsewhere in the 'global South,' transformative approaches recognise that mainstream transitional justice is intimately linked to Euro-Atlantic claims to universalism and a global project of political and economic liberalisation. In practice, they counter the tendency of mainstream approaches to centre states while marginalising other actors, use a narrow human rights discourse that side-lines socioeconomic rights and historical injustices, and valorise technicist and short-term legal-institutional measures focused on reform rather than deeper social change.[2]

1 Jens Meierhenrich, Alexander Laban Hinton and Lawrence Douglas, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Marcos Zunino, *Justice Framed: A Genealogy of Transitional Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

2 Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, "From the Neocolonial 'Transitional' to Indigenous Formations of Justice," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 7, no. 2 (2013): 197–204; Moses Chrispus Okello, Chris Dolan, Undine Whande, Nokukhanya Mncwabe, Levis Onegi and Stephen Oola, eds., *Where Law Meets Reality: Forging African Transitional Justice* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2012); Paul Gready and Simon Robins, "From Transitional to Transformative Justice," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 8, no. 3 (2014): 339–361.

Highlighting contextualised rather than generic measures and acknowledging the role of non-state actors, transformative transitional justice prioritises experiences, ideas, resources and solutions that already exist on the ground, particularly those of victims and survivors. Thus, the focus is on bottom-up, survivor-centred measures, led by actors beyond the state, which can proceed separately from as well as complement top-down, official measures. Moreover, recognising that transitions are long-term processes, transformative transitional justice tackles historical injustices and socioeconomic rights abuses as root causes, drivers and amplifiers of harms, while acknowledging the continuum that often exists between past and ongoing harms and their intersectional and intergenerational impacts. It therefore embraces open-ended, iterative and participatory measures that adapt to the context and build on each other over time, while promoting pluralism of participants and ideas.[3]

As Sonja Klinsky and I have argued,[4] both mainstream and transformative transitional justice offer new ways of, first, thinking about the multifaceted effects of climate change and, second, designing climate change responses that adequately respond to those effects. Through truth telling and truth seeking, transitional justice processes can generate a shared understanding and record of how climate impacts lead to profound and long-lasting climate harms, what the types and nature of these harms are and whom they affect, and which circumstances enable them. In addition to creating enabling conditions for state and non-state actors to accept and take responsibility for climate harms, transitional justice processes can identify and provide the forms of material and symbolic reparation that those affected by climate harms need and demand. As Sonja Klinsky and I have shown, transitional justice can help build broad-based solidarity for contextualised, bottom-up climate change responses that are linked to top-down national and international efforts.[5]

The resulting responses would be designed to acknowledge past harms while deterring these same harms in the future. The fact that climate impacts are most likely to continue – as climate change causes long-term changes in temperature and weather – does not take away the power of seeing and acknowledging the full range of past climate harms brought by climate impacts and collaborating to prevent and mitigate these harms in the future, especially when this is done in line with the conceptions of climate justice held by those most affected.

And the fact that climate change is a global and systemic issue caused by historical and ongoing emissions by state and non-state actors primarily in the 'global North' – usually with little clarity regarding individual perpetrators and victims/survivors – does not undermine the capacity of transitional justice to address it. Transitional justice theory and practice, through years of critique, contestation and adaptation, have expanded to encompass such systemic issues, with examples being processes that address deep-rooted socioeconomic harms and the legacies of colonialism and slavery.[6]

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3 Paul Gready and Simon Robins, eds., *From Transitional to Transformative Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Matthew Evans, ed., *Transitional and Transformative Justice: Critical and International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2019); Matthew Evans, ed., *Beyond Transitional Justice: Transformative Justice and the State of the Field (or non-field)* (London: Routledge, 2022); Jasmina Brankovic and Simon Robins, *Mainstreaming Popular Participation in Transitional Justice: Lessons from Multilateral, State and Civil Society Actors in The Gambia and Somalia* (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2025).

4 Sonja Klinsky and Jasmina Brankovic, *The Global Climate Regime and Transitional Justice* (London: Routledge, 2018).

5 Ibid.

6 See, e.g., Laura García Martín, "Challenging the Transitional Justice Paradigm: Addressing ESRs Violations in Transitional Justice Processes," *Anuario Español de Derecho Internacional* 35 (2019): 655–677; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Reparatory Justice for People of African Descent* (2024).

Furthermore, as I have noted elsewhere,[7] transformative approaches to transitional justice overlap with climate justice practices, which similarly acknowledge the intersectional and intergenerational harms of climate change, prioritise local-level ideas and resources, promote iterative and participatory climate change responses, and recognise the value of pluralism in beliefs and practices. Influenced by indigenous environmental ethics and mobilisation, climate justice is founded on contextualised, inclusive and bottom-up climate action. In addition to contributing to other efforts, a transformative transitional justice process can therefore be in itself a form of climate justice in practice.[8]

Importantly, transformative processes in contexts of both political and climate transition are not just aspirational, or even normative. These processes are occurring in practice around the world. Individuals and communities affected by different types of harms are daily facing the challenges they elicit and, accordingly, developing locally informed and led measures to address them. They have access to contextual knowledge, resources and networks that external experts and other influential actors might not even consider, and therefore ideas and solutions that are and can be innovative and geared towards transformation.[9]

I learnt this lesson in collaborating on participatory action research with the Western Cape branch of Khulumani Support Group, the South African apartheid survivors' social movement. In addition to linking the high rates of violence in their communities to the country's lack of socioeconomic transformation after the political transition, Khulumani members engage in what they term "people-driven transformation" activities, including for example citizen journalism, arts-based intergenerational workshops on issues like sanitation and housing, and

7 Jasmina Brankovic, "Transitional and Climate Justice: New Opportunities for Justice in Transition," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 17, no. 2 (2023): 185–191.

8 Jasmina Brankovic and Augustine Njamnshi, "Transformative Transitional Justice: How Old Tools Could Open New Avenues for Climate Justice," Justice in Conflict, 28 May 2024, **https://justiceinconflict.org/2024/05/28/transformative-transitional-justice-how-old-tools-could-open-new-avenues-for-climate-justice/**

9 See the range of concrete examples discussed in Evans, 2019.

collaborative income-generation projects in marginalised areas. While the literature has focused on Khulumani's advocacy in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a mainstream official mechanism, the members have been doing a range of other forward-looking activities explicitly linked to post-apartheid transformation – they are putting transformative transitional justice into practice.[10]

Residents of Newcastle and Dannhauser are in a similar position of facing the daily challenges brought by climate harms and developing both ideas and practices for addressing them using the local knowledge and resources available to them. Rather than imposing a set of pre-designed activities, in our initiative we adopted a participatory ethos and applied participatory methods to better elicit, foreground and document the residents' experiences of climate harms and their existing and envisioned solutions. In this, our initiative both used transformative approaches and created a new transformative transitional justice process. It similarly used climate justice principles and implemented a form of climate justice tailored to the context.

The Context

As a country, South Africa is highly vulnerable to climate change due to changing precipitation patterns and cycles of flooding and drought.[11] In Newcastle and Dannhauser, as in many municipalities in the KwaZulu-Natal province,[12] climate change is threatening livelihoods, food security, water resources, health infrastructure and ecosystem services, among other essentials. Research shows that changing weather patterns have resulted in flash and severe flooding as well as extreme heat and droughts in the area, which have exacerbated water pollution, low air quality and land degradation. Agricultural activities and the development of formal and informal settlements in flood zones, coupled with population growth, have further increased residents' vulnerability to climate impacts.[13]

Climate change has most affected marginalised communities in the area, which are dealing with poverty, unemployment and lagging provision of basic services – particularly acute issues given the inequalities that are legacies of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past. In Newcastle, more than 60 percent of the population faced lower bound poverty in 2022, while the figure was over 70 percent in Dannhauser.[14] In this context, residents of the communities we collaborated

10 Jasmina Brankovic, Brian Mphahlele, Sindiswa Nunu, Agnes Ngxukuma, Nompumelelo Njana and Yanelisa Sishuba, *Violence, Inequality and Transformation: Apartheid Survivors on South Africa's Ongoing Transition* (Johannesburg: DSI-NRF CoE in Human Development, 2020).

11 World Bank, *Climate Risk Country Profile: South Africa* (2021).

12 Karen Singh, "10 Dead, 13 Missing after KZN Storms, Heavy Rains Leave Trail of Devastation," Daily News, 3 December 2024, **https://dailynews.co.za/mercury/news/2023-12-28-10-dead-13-missing-after-kzn-storms-heavy-rains-leave-trail-of-devastation/**

13 Institute of Natural Resources, *Environmental Management Framework for the Amajuba District Municipality: Environmental Management Framework EMF Report* (2019); Amajuba District Municipality, *Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Response Plan* (2018); Philippa Burmeister, Ashleigh Maritz and Nigel Govender, *Climate Change Impact Assessment for the Newcastle Gas Engine Power Plant, KwaZulu-Natal* (June 2021); Newcastle City Council, *Strategic Position for the Management of Low Lying Areas of Newcastle* (2017).

14 Quinton Boucher, "Unemployment and Poverty Levels Hurting Newcastle and Bordering Towns," Newcastillian News, 1 September 2022, **https://newcastillian.com/2022/09/01/unemployment-and-poverty-levels-hurting-newcastle-and-bordering-towns/**. Lower bound poverty is calculated by adding the food poverty line and average expenditure on essential non-food items by households whose food expenditure is below but close to the food poverty line.

with are both highly vulnerable to climate impacts and working with low adaptive capacity.[15] As the impacts and harms of climate change are intersectional, women and girls and members of other marginalised groups are experiencing particularly grave climate harms.[16] These will be discussed in detail below.

Responses to climate change in Newcastle and Dannhauser are informed by South Africa's comparatively progressive climate change laws and policies. The Climate Change Act, adopted in 2024, states its aim as enabling an effective climate change response at the national level and a just transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy and society.[17] Other key frameworks include the National Environmental Management Act of 1998, the National Water Act of 1998, the Disaster Management Act of 2002, the Air Quality Act of 2004 and the Waste Act of 2008, alongside the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and the National Climate Change Response Policy White Paper. As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, South Africa has submitted Nationally Determined Contributions to global goals on adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage. Provincial frameworks, particularly KwaZulu-Natal's Provincial Climate Change Implementation Plan, further inform local responses.

Education has been severely affected in terms of both infrastructure and the mental health of students who study in our schools. ... Many children can no longer study and then get jobs because they could not go to school and study in a proper way.

– Amahle Masango

Amajuba District Municipality, which includes Newcastle and Dannhauser, developed its own Climate Change Response Plan, with sectoral interventions focused on agriculture, water, human health, biodiversity and environment, and disaster management, infrastructure and human settlements. Amajuba also has an Environmental Management Framework designed to ensure that development planning takes into account issues such as agricultural resources, flood zones, air and water quality, and heritage resources. It identifies "responding effectively to climate change" as a priority.[18]

National, provincial and municipal frameworks have shaped development plans, disaster management approaches, waste management strategies and other responses that bear on government-led climate change action in Newcastle and Dannhauser. As in many municipalities in the province, however, lack of funding, limited coordination among government structures, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation have negatively affected implementation. Another crucial factor hindering effective implementation is a lack of public participation.[19]

15 Sithabile Hlahla, Mulala Danny Simatele, Trevor Hill and Tafadzwanashe Mabhaudhi, "Climate-Urban Nexus: A Study of Vulnerability of Women in Urban Areas of KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa," *Weather, Climate, and Society* 14, no. 3 (2022): 933–948; Michele Ruiters and Alvino Wildschutt, "Food Insecurity in South Africa: Where Does Gender Matter?" *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 86 (2010): 8–24.

16 Paul Reid and Coleen Vogel, "Living and Responding to Multiple Stressors in South Africa: Glimpses from KwaZulu-Natal," *Global Environmental Change* 16, no. 2 (2006): 195–206; Yianna Lambrou and Grazia Piano, *Gender: The Missing Component of the Response to Climate Change* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization, 2006).

17 Republic of South Africa Government Gazette, "Climate Change Act, 2024," 23 July 2024, **https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202407/50966climatechangeact222024.pdf**

18 Institute of Natural Resources, *Environmental Management Framework for the Amajuba District Municipality, Volume II: Strategic Environmental Management Plan* (2019), 12.

19 Sithabile Hlahla, Adrian Nel and Trevor R. Hill, "Assessing Municipal-Level Governance Responses to Climate Change in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 62, no. 6 (2019): 1089–1107.

Yet public participation is a key provision of South African frameworks on climate change. The Climate Change Act includes a section on public participation, making access to decision-making processes and information a requirement for all state organs with functions affected by climate change. The other climate-relevant national frameworks mentioned above similarly include specific participation provisions, in line with South Africa's Constitution.[20]

Moreover, the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act of 2002 makes detailed provisions for structures and procedures that go beyond public participation to enable "participatory governance" in partnership with local residents.[21] They include inclusive needs assessments, issue-based representative advisory councils and local committees, full access to local government processes and documents, and participatory planning, budgeting and monitoring and evaluation. These provisions go beyond newspaper announcements and one-off public consultations – they set up processes that actively involve local community members in decision making and implementation.

This means that South Africa's national, provincial and local frameworks – combining climate action and public participation – create an enabling environment for climate change responses not only informed but also shaped by those most affected by climate impacts. Transformative transitional justice provides a new avenue for making the most of this enabling environment and connecting bottom-up climate change responses to top-down efforts, while recognising in community-led climate action a model and instance of transitional and climate justice.

Transformation, Local and Global

Our initiative in Newcastle and Dannhauser demonstrates the depth of experience that residents have of dealing with climate change, and the range of local resources and variety of solutions they bring to climate change responses, including in collaboration with government and other actors. Many of the harms and solutions participants shared in the initiative would not have become publicly visible otherwise, as the focus tends to be on spectacular disasters and economic losses.[22] They represent a breadth, richness and specificity – encompassing issues such as mental health and cultural practices – that expert assessments and interventions often lack, even when they include community consultations. The transformative transitional justice process we undertook demonstrates ways of accessing this deep knowledge to deal with the past and build solidarity for future action, and thereby to develop more contextually responsive and transformative climate action, from the local to the global levels.

Without a doubt, the process we implemented was highly localised, taking place as it did in two municipalities. This raises the question of what degree of transformation such a transformative transitional justice process can really achieve. Moreover, it raises the question of how it can address the global nature of the causes and amplifiers of climate change, and the historical and

20 Fredua Agyemang, "The Right to Public Participation in Advancing Environmental Sustainability in South African Cities," *Journal of Environmental and Earth Science* 7, no. 6 (2025): 244–266.

21 Republic of South Africa Government Gazette, "Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2002," 20 November 2000, Ch. 4, Sec. 16, **https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/a32-000.pdf**

22 Sophia Brown, "'One Thousand Ways to Experience Loss': Why Acknowledging Non-Economic Loss and Damage Is So Important," The Loss and Damage Newsletter, 15 January 2026, **https://lossanddamage.substack.com/p/one-thousand-ways-to-experience-loss**

ongoing responsibility of government and corporate actors in the 'global North' (emphasised by participants themselves, as shown below). In fact, transformative transitional justice has been critiqued as assuming that survivors' and other bottom-up initiatives "automatically generate inclusion, empowerment and agency" and that they can have a transformative effect at scale, beyond the local.[23]

Regarding its transformative effects, participants and other residents and stakeholders noted that our initiative, co-designed and co-implemented as it was, showed the value of a plurality of local voices and the resources they bring to the table, particularly of those affected by climate harms. It strengthened people's sense of agency to take forward and advocate for community-led climate change responses, with the process serving as a tool of acknowledgement, learning and mobilisation whose outcomes participants said they would use in continuing efforts. Furthermore, the transformative transitional justice process emphasised the connections between historical injustices and present-day inequalities that exacerbate climate impacts and their profound harms, with participants arguing that creating a future with fewer such harms is an open-ended project that requires more than disaster management and technicist climate change responses.[24]

These reflections indicate transformation among the participants and others who took part in the initiative, for example in shifting internal power relations to the benefit of members of marginalised groups, particularly women and youth participants. It also changed perceptions of hierarchies of knowledge, with the experience and solutions of those affected by climate harms increasingly seen as legitimate and a necessary contribution to external expert knowledge – both by participants and by other stakeholders. This did not occur

23 See, e.g., Padraig McAuliffe, *Transformative Transitional Justice and the Malleability of Post-Conflict States* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017), 262–279.

24 Compare this feedback to the definition of transformative transitional justice outlined in Paul Gready, "Introduction," in *From Transitional to Transformative Justice*, eds. Paul Gready and Simon Robins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 27.

'automatically'; it is due to the participatory ethos of the initiative and the facilitation methods co-developed with participants, which tackled emerging issues and supported dialogue, collaboration and equitable relationships, while responding to needs and conceptualisations of climate justice in the area. The initiative had its fair share of constraints, challenges and conflicts, but the outcomes, as detailed below, indicate local-level transformation that is also conducive to longer-term change.

Regarding scale, we witnessed increasing participation and active support from municipal council and administration members and other powerful local stakeholders, including from the private sector, as we implemented the transformative transitional justice process. If nothing else, our initiative shows that government and other actors who join such a process earn a degree of trust and buy-in from communities affected by climate impacts, which creates opportunities for cross-sectoral solidarity and an incentive for powerful actors both to take part and to take restorative responsibility for addressing climate harms at the national level.

The process opens new pathways for South African government and corporate actors: first, to recognise the full range of harms wrought by climate change; second, to collaborate with those affected to create more suitable and ultimately impactful climate change responses that address these harms within the country; and, third, to champion the resulting ideas and practices via regional and international climate platforms. As noted above, this is especially the case given the comparatively enabling legal and policy environment in South Africa.

Transformation beyond the local and national levels – especially with regard to responsibility and repair – is admittedly a difficult task. Here, I follow Paul Gready in proposing that transformation via transitional justice occurs at multiple levels, including "the individual, inter-

personal relationships, the community, institutions/the state, and global systems," with change at one level having the potential to trigger change at another. Gready argues that ideas travel among actors within and across these multiple levels, changing norms as they are adopted and adapted, through cross-pollination, cooperation and contestation.[25] Indeed, this publication and other dissemination methods we have used are an effort at this kind of cross-pollination, bringing the experiences and lessons learnt from implementing a transformative transitional justice process for climate harms to a broad range of actors, including those with influence to bear on international climate frameworks and action.

Many houses hold memories, and when you are forced to move to another place, it is not easy. Many people have been very traumatised by that.

– Phumlani Gule

As a year-long initiative, we cannot claim to have had a transformative impact at large scale. But the process demonstrates a more comprehensive conceptualisation of the effects of climate change – as a wide range of profound and long-lasting harms, rooted in and exacerbating structural inequalities – and of responding to them in a backwards-looking and forward-looking manner that enables deeper social change. This includes opportunities for addressing the causes of and responsibility for climate change in novel ways.

Furthermore, as Sonja Klinsky and I have argued,[26] transitional justice for climate harms encompasses prosecutions and litigation. Yet, its power in terms of accountability – at least in the current political moment – may lie in normalising acknowledgement, restorative responsibility and cross-sectoral solidarity, and thereby constructively involving the government and corporate actors most implicated in historical and ongoing climate change in ways that shift norms and power relations. As we have learnt from four decades of practice, transitional justice is a politicised process and a long-term one, marked by contestation and setbacks, yet it opens doors that previously were closed.

25 Ibid., 13–18.

26 Klinsky and Brankovic, 2018.

Process Design and Implementation

Throughout the process, we used a transformative approach that rests on a participatory foundation. This section discusses the steps we took, including working with participants in an equitable manner, collectively mapping climate harms and solutions, collaboratively designing the transitional justice process, implementing a truth-telling process, a commemoration and a memorial, and conducting reform-focused advocacy for community-led climate policies and practices. Covering challenges and opportunities that emerged in the process, the section demonstrates what a transformative transitional justice process for climate harms looks like in practice.

A Participatory Ethos

The initiative had a participatory ethos by design, with participants leading every step of the process hand in hand with the CSVR team and community facilitators.[27] Aiming to go beyond the limited forms of participation Stanley Biggs termed 'contractual,' 'consultative' and 'collaborative' – which to different degrees place external experts in control – we collectively developed a more equitable and 'collegial' relationship and approach in our initiative.[28]

CSVR first started working with community members in the area in 2021, while interviewing residents for a study on the challenges and empowerment gaps women face in rural communities across South Africa.[29] An interviewee from Osizweni, a township in Newcastle, connected the economic, political and social exclusion women experience to climate harms, noting:

> *Due to continuous rainfalls and flooding, our houses are getting damaged, as most of us live in shacks. The rivers sometimes get full, making it difficult to travel to town or check up on our neighbours. Most people have died because of floods. I remember a while back, a young girl died due to floods … the young lady had no family members present at that moment, and her body was discovered days later.*[30]

The women we collaborated with on that study offered an entry point for mobilising residents for our initiative. They suggested we develop the initiative in both the Osizweni township in Newcastle and the nearby rural town of Dannhauser, in order to capture the similarities and differences in the climate harms experienced by the two communities and the solutions residents developed, as well as to reach a broader group and thereby increase our impact.

Because of the connections that local residents identified among gender, marginalisation and climate impacts, we prioritised the participation of women, as well as young people, who face longer-term challenges of climate change. An initial group of women residents from Newcastle

27 Andrea Cornwall, ed., *The Participation Reader* (London: Zed Books, 2011); Hilary Bradbury, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015).

28 Stanley D. Biggs, *Resource-Poor Farmer Participation in Research: A Synthesis of Experiences from Nine National Agricultural Research Systems* (The Hague: International Service for National Agricultural Research, 1989).

29 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, *Lived Realities: Empowerment Gaps and Opportunities for Women Living in Rural Communities in South Africa* (2023).

30 Ibid., 18.

invited a larger group to join the initiative, arriving at a core group of about 75 participants from the two areas, who represented a range of genders, ages, occupations and other markers while remaining predominantly women and young people.

In line with the principles of transformative transitional justice and climate justice, we used participatory methods to collaborate with residents to design and implement the process from start to finish. To acknowledge their centrality and contributions to the initiative, we provided participants with modest honoraria for each activity. By workshopping each step of the initiative and using a combination of small group and plenary discussions, along with arts-based elicitive tools to inspire creativity and teamwork, the participants brought experiences and proposals to each activity and together voted on which to move forward. This approach helped participants deal with the occasional strategy disputes that emerged, as well as amplify the voices of members of marginalised communities within the group.

The CSVR team worked closely with three community facilitators from Newcastle and Dannhauser: Sibongile Ngema, a South African Red Cross Society member; Thandeka Buthelezi, a women's leader in a local church; and Themba Khumalo, the director of community-based environmental group Sukumani Environmental Justice.[31] Well-networked and respected in their communities, the facilitators convened residents, facilitated activities, and connected the initiative with influential government, religious, traditional, business and other stakeholders. We also brought on board a documenter, Wandile Kubheka, who is local to Newcastle and knows the area and its challenges well.

All aspects of the activities, from venues and catering to the memorial, were done by residents from the area and participants in the initiative. This ensured not only that all the efforts were locally designed and led, but also that they benefitted residents.

31 I am grateful to Michelle Cruywagen and Siphesihle Mvundla of groundWork for connecting us with Themba Khumalo, as well as providing insights into community organising around climate issues in KwaZulu-Natal.

Collective Mapping of Climate Harms and Solutions

Through a needs assessment and community-based mapping, we acquired an understanding of local conditions and built a solid foundation for the transitional justice process. Based on guidance from our initial contacts in the area, we organised a series of focus group discussions in Newcastle and Dannhauser with over 80 participants, designed to draw out residents' understandings of climate change and their experiences of climate harms.

The participants discussed which locations and social groups are most harmed by climate impacts, and ways in which climate change vulnerabilities overlap with vulnerability to poverty, violence and other deep-rooted challenges of marginalisation. They talked about solutions they are implementing and envisioning to address past climate harms and mitigate future harms. They also made note of key stakeholders hindering and supporting climate action in the area. We supplemented focus group discussions with several informal interviews with civil society representatives working in the two communities.

This assessment helped us not only access an initial sense of the climate harms and solutions in the area, but also build existing and new relationships and mobilise potential participants, while managing their expectations regarding the impact of the initiative to avoid disappointment and re-traumatisation. Based on their input, we decided to alternate the remainder of our activities between Newcastle and Dannhauser, to ensure both communities' views were represented and to manage potential conflict. Travelling between the two sites also helped foster understanding, relationships and joint activities among the participants from the two communities.

Climate change has harmed us a lot because now many jobs are gone. And if people are trying to make a living through agriculture, that livelihood is under stress because people are not making as much of a profit as they did before.

– Jabulile Sotesti

Our first meeting as a large group included about 75 participants, who, as mentioned above, became the core of the initiative. As we had anticipated fewer participants, the turnout showed us the importance that addressing climate change holds for residents. To encourage inclusivity and active engagement, we decided to use participatory mapping to elicit the range of climate harms they had experienced directly and indirectly in their communities, as well as the range of solutions they perceived.

Splitting themselves into small groups and using paper and markers, the participants first collectively drew maps of their communities, where climate impacts had occurred, and the harms they caused to residents. After presenting the maps in plenary, discussing the harms, and sharing additional experiences, the participants returned to their small groups and drew a *second* set of community maps, detailing existing and potential solutions – both backwards-looking and forward-looking – to the climate harms they had identified. These maps included a list of local stakeholders and resources that could help residents strengthen the solutions. The participants presented the second set of maps in plenary, comparing them to the first set. They commented on the significant amount of climate responses already being implemented by residents, and shared ideas for additional activities, including as part of our initiative.

Participants remarked that the participatory and comparative mapping exercise provided a structured yet flexible space for them to articulate and acknowledge the profound effects of their experiences. They noted that it allowed for a collective visualisation of past and ongoing climate harms and helped participants draw connections among climate harms, environmental degradation, historical injustices and socioeconomic inequality. The exercise made the links between transitional justice and climate justice seem intuitive, with participants noting that climate harms both emerge from and exacerbate the marginalisation that is a legacy of the colonial and apartheid eras. It also helped take participants from abstract discussions about climate change to practical planning of effective responses.

Collaborative Transitional Justice Process Design

Based on the mapping outcomes, participants collaborated on conceptualising, validating and finally implementing four transitional justice measures over six months. Infused with MHPSS and arts-based methods, the measures combined addressing climate harms that occurred in the past with building solidarity to prevent and reduce the harms of future climate events. The ones that initially attracted the most interest were a memorial listing the names of people who lost their lives in climate-related floods and an environmental clean-up campaign led by local residents and schoolchildren to highlight the links between climate change and environmental degradation. Participants saw both as a means to generate community dialogue and shared responsibility for climate change responses.

Other leading ideas included tree planting and the creation of green spaces as enduring symbols of recovery and resilience, as well as hiking trails with educational signs, which would create opportunities for guided walks, learning from past disasters, and developing better community-led climate change responses. Participants also discussed advocacy efforts with the Ikwezi coal mine in Dannhauser, to push for corporate responsibility and reparative measures such as cleaning up mine run-off that climate-related floods caused to pollute the entire community.

We organised a validation workshop with the participants to collectively select which of the measures to implement. In the week before the workshop, the area was hit by severe thunderstorms. An area resident died when flooding caused a bridge to collapse. On the day of the validation workshop, it was still raining heavily. The day was also the anniversary of heavy landslides in the area two years before. A number of participants were unable to attend the workshop due to fear and anxiety, as the weather evoked the trauma of losing loved ones, homes and livelihoods. Many of the participants who did join us arrived feeling overwhelmed and in need of support.

Recognising this, we dedicated time at the beginning of the session for a check-in and emotional containment, to acknowledge how participants were feeling and enable them to fully engage in the rest of the workshop. For the remainder of the initiative, we provided referrals to MHPSS providers in the area, shared printed resources on managing trauma responses in oneself and others, and regularly discussed mental health challenges with the participants. We also conducted check-ins and containment exercises during meetings, and offered individual and group MHPSS debrief sessions at the end of each activity. These efforts were led by CSVR's MHPSS practitioner.[32]

32 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, "Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice: MHPSS for Climate-Focused Processes," video, 18 September 2025, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_-aeNapfPM**

During the validation session that followed, the participants reviewed ideas and collaboratively decided to focus on three activity areas: memorialisation activities; public education; and advocacy for corporate responsibility and government oversight. The aim was to implement new measures as well as build on existing climate- and environment-related activities in the area in order to have the most impact and reach a wide range of residents and stakeholders. Participants reflected that their efforts should be inclusive of all residents, foreground the resources and networks already available in the area, emphasise the knowledge and mobilisation of those most affected by climate harms, and address the connections between inequalities and climate harms. As such, their process design was from the beginning an example of transformative transitional justice.

Over the following months, the core group of participants split themselves into groups, refined the three activity areas into discrete transitional justice measures, and made these measures a reality. Each group collectively decided on the goal and objectives of their measure, the intended beneficiaries, the programme of activities, and the key messages they sought to disseminate. As time went on, we introduced arts-based practices into the meetings to inspire the participants, strengthen relationships and facilitate decision making. The participants wrote and performed poetry, a cappella songs and theatrical skits, which they reported helped elicit new ideas that ended up enriching the transitional justice measures.

The CSVR team facilitated the process during monthly visits to the area, while the community facilitators assisted the participants on an ongoing basis, bringing them together in regular meetings, helping them plan, and sensitising government, civil society and private sector stakeholders in the community who could assist with implementation. The documenter took photographs of the measures and conducted interviews for narrative videos, with the aim of capturing and making publicly visible the participants' efforts, while showing what transformative transitional justice for climate harms can look like in practice.[33]

33 The photos and videos are available at **https://www.csvr.org.za/transformative-transitional-justice-for-climate-justice/**

By the end of the process, the participants had implemented four transitional justice measures: a truth-telling process; a commemoration event with an educational component; a memorial; and reform-focused advocacy for participatory municipal climate change response development. Led and attended by the core group of participants, these measures also attracted the participation of about 150 additional residents and a range of government, religious, traditional, civil society and business stakeholders.

A Truth-Telling Process on Climate Harms

Truth telling is a core component of transitional justice. Usually conducted under the aegis of a state-run or civil society-led truth commission, alongside more investigative truth seeking, truth telling entails people affected by past harms – usually as victims and survivors (and at times as direct or indirect perpetrators or bystanders) – offering statements on what they experienced, within the parameters of specific types of violations committed during a particular time period. By generating a shared understanding of the past, the aim is to make past harms easier to grasp and prevent, as well as harder to deny.[34]

In line with our transformative transitional justice approach, the truth-telling process we organised focused on the experiences of local residents without constraining the types of harm or the period they could talk about. It couched experiences of harm within the historical context of the area, including past injustices and ongoing inequalities. Moreover, it foregrounded not only residents' experiences of harm as victims and survivors but also their solutions as active citizens. Our truth-telling process was therefore designed to acknowledge and raise awareness of the full range of climate harms that have occurred in the area, how they have affected residents in the short and long term, how they intersect with socioeconomic and other inequalities, and modes of response and repair advocated by those most affected.

Instead of the more formal configuration of participants sitting in rows to witness the testimony of a truth teller, the participants sat in concentric circles to encourage a sense of community and acknowledge the collective nature of both the harms and the solutions being shared. Taking turns to tell their stories, most chose to focus on the diversity of experiences of different social groups, with young people, older persons and women speaking to their individual experiences as well as those of their peers. Numerous residents attended the truth-telling process, bearing witness, as did municipal officials and other stakeholders. The participants were offered MHPSS services and debriefing sessions during and after the process.

As discussed in detail below, participants talked about changing weather patterns and their impacts in Newcastle and Dannhauser. They discussed harms to life, housing, belongings, livelihoods, education, agricultural practices, food security, cultural and burial practices, and physical and mental health, among others. They spoke about how the harms increased the existing vulnerabilities of residents, especially women and young and older persons. In addition, participants shared their own solutions to climate harms, including popular education, adjusting agricultural practices, ensuring more accessible healthcare, providing mutual

34 Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010); Jamie Rowen, *Searching for Truth in the Transitional Justice Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Paul Ugor and Bonny Ibhawoh, eds., *Narrating Transitional Justice: Memory in the Age of Truth and Reconciliation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025).

psychosocial support, and working with a range of government and civil society stakeholders to mobilise for community-led climate change responses. Select testimonies were made into a video to be shared on digital platforms as a form of documentation and an educational tool.[35]

A Climate Harms Commemoration

Commemorations are acts of memorialisation, a key transitional justice measure intended to honour and remember those affected by harms. A type of symbolic reparation, memorialisation processes enable public acknowledgement of the harms done and their consequences for victims and survivors (as well as larger society), restoration of the dignity of those affected, and recognition of the urgency of addressing and preventing harms. Commemorations – whether occasional or recurring on specific dates such as anniversaries – create an opportunity for people to gather not only to remember what happened, but also to educate young people and the public about harms, shape the way harms are understood and talked about in the long term, inspire people to recognise and reduce such harms, and mobilise them to individual and collective action.[36]

As a transformative transitional justice measure, our commemoration event was designed by the participants themselves to honour all who have suffered climate harms in the area, while increasing knowledge and skills in how to respond to climate change and the environmental degradation that climate change exacerbates. The participants articulated the commemoration as a way for themselves and other residents to gain public recognition for what they suffered, emphasise the links between climate harms and inequalities in the area, face the traumas of climate harms to start the process of healing, and educate residents about community-led responses to climate impacts.

The commemoration began with singing and prayer, which participants noted brought them comfort and a sense of unity. A candle-lighting ceremony accompanied by a moment of silence followed, creating space for remembrance and shared recognition of the depth of the harms and suffering experienced by the communities. A young woman and member of the core participant group, Amahle Bongeka Masango, then stood to read a poem she had composed about global climate change and the importance of uniting locally to tackle it.

After this, a group of participants performed a theatrical skit they had developed about the loss of a child to flooding and how it brings residents together to help the mother cope and demand that the government repair roads and bridges to prevent more grave losses. Afterwards, several participants went to the stage to display three large-format paintings they had collaboratively created, which explain the causes and impacts of global climate change and ideas for community-led responses.

35 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, "Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice: A Climate Harms Truth-Telling Process," video, 14 October 2025, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQ7D9TOSf_c&t=430s**

36 Pablo de Greiff, ed., *The Handbook of Reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, *From Memory to Action: A Toolkit for Memorialization in Post-Conflict Societies* (2012); Mina Rauschenbach, Julia Viebach and Stephan Parmentier, eds., *Localising Memory in Transitional Justice: The Dynamics and Informal Practices of Memorialisation after Mass Violence and Dictatorship* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

Climate Change: A Poem

The Earth cries out in pain and strife
At human ravage, without life
The future's uncertain, the present's dire
A world on fire, a burning pyre

Rising seas, and temperature too
A changing climate, for me and you
The consequences dire, the future unsure
A call to action we must endure

The polar bears, the coral reefs
The forest shrinking, the wildlife grief
The humans suffer, the planet too
A cry for help: What can we do?

We must unite, we must take a stand
Reduce, reuse, recycle, hand to hand
Renewable energy, a cleaner way
For a brighter future, starting today

Let's work, for the planet's sake
A sustainable future, for our children's sake
We can make a difference, we can be the change
For a better world, where love and hope range

– Amahle Bongeka Masango

The commemoration included an educational component. Participants who were already involved in a waste management initiative in Newcastle conducted a workshop on ways to reduce, store and recycle trash and other waste so as to avoid it exacerbating local water and land pollution during climate-related flooding. They also shared upcoming opportunities to join clean-up campaigns. They decided on this topic as a manageable and practical start for mobilising community members who were not yet involved.

Many residents attended the commemoration event, as did numerous government, religious, traditional, private sector and other stakeholders from the area. After the event, participants shared with the CSVR team that the positive response of the area residents made them feel inspired and more confident about community-based solutions to climate harms. They also highlighted the importance of those most affected designing measures to address those harms, including via memorialisation efforts.[37]

37 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, "Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice: A Climate Harms Commemoration," video, 28 November 2025, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DLdffCtrFU**

A Memorial Honouring All Who Have Suffered Climate Harms

Representing another type of memorialisation, a memorial is a physical object designed to acknowledge and honour people or an event, creating a space for memory and education activities. A public site of remembrance, it can provide a lasting and consistent location for visitors to reflect, share information and stories, support each other, and mobilise for redress and the prevention of further harms.[38]

As noted above, a memorial was one of the first measures residents agreed on when conceptualising a transformative transitional justice process for climate harms. In addition to honouring those who have suffered grave climate harms, they articulated it as a symbol of remembrance, a historical monument and an educational site. They also saw it as a way to draw visitors and 'tourists' to the area, mainly to encourage global–local solidarity, collective action, and financial support for residents in addressing climate change and harms, but also potentially to bring economic benefits to area businesses.

Participants agreed that the grounds of a public building would be the ideal site for the memorial, as such a location regularly attracts residents and serves as an information access point. This would also ensure that the memorial was cleaned, maintained and protected along with the rest of the grounds.

MEMORIAL

HONOURING ALL WHO HAVE SUFFERED
CLIMATE HARMS

ISIKHUMBUZO

SOKUHLONIPHA BONKE
ABAHLUKUMEZEKE NGENXA YESIMO SEZULU

Rising seas, and temperature too
A changing climate, for me and you
The consequences dire, the future unsure
A call to action we must endure

Let's work, for the planet's sake
A sustainable future, for our children's sake
We can make a difference, we can be the change
For a better world, where love and hope range

– Amahle Bongeka Masango

While at first participants thought it best to engrave on the memorial the names of residents who had lost their lives to climate impacts, difficulties with accessing the names via the municipal offices, ethical questions around the willingness of victims and their families to be represented and take part in the initiative, and recognition of the far-reaching and ongoing harms of climate change led the group to choose more inclusive language for the inscription. The dedication states that the memorial honours "all who have suffered climate harms," in English and isiZulu. To link the community's losses to the need for collective action, as well as mark the collective nature of the design process, the participants agreed to include two verses from Amahle Masango's commemoration poem below the dedication on the memorial.

In line with local monument aesthetics, the memorial is simple brick with a granite face, about a metre wide and two metres tall, designed and made by an area craftsman recommended by the participants, who also took part in the commemoration event.[39]

38 Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Stefanie Schäfer, eds., *Memorials in Times of Transition* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2020).

39 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, "Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice: A Community-Led Memorial for Climate Harms," video, 15 July 2025, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ta1ykZbCA7Y**

Advocacy for Participatory Climate Change Responses

Institutional reform in transitional justice is intended to create an environment where harms are less accepted and more difficult to commit, through changes to existing state institutions and their practices and/or the creation of new ones.[40]

Our initiative included advocacy efforts to do the same for climate harms, with the transformative transitional justice aim of foregrounding the solutions of those most affected. These efforts began with advocacy for reparative measures from a mining company, combined with greater government oversight over corporate compliance, and later shifted to bottom-up climate change responses at the municipal level that complement top-down responses. While every measure we implemented was both backwards-looking and forward-looking, the advocacy efforts were explicitly forward-looking and drew on the outcomes of the truth-telling, commemoration and memorial measures for evidence and recommendations.

After discussing numerous ideas, the participants first focused on developing an advocacy plan aimed at the Ikwezi mine and local government stakeholders. Linking climate impacts and environmental degradation, residents of Dannhauser argued that uncontrolled run-off from the mine was causing water pollution, which was spread around the entire community by climate-related flooding. They said this has caused livestock deaths, destroyed crops, reduced people's access to clean water, and increased cases of respiratory illnesses across the area.[41] They also noted that mine blasting cracked the walls of nearby homes and mine vehicles damaged roads in the community, which made them more likely to wash away or become inaccessible during climate-related floods. Participants reported that the mine had ignored previous advocacy efforts and responded to community protests by calling in police, who in one case shot protesters with rubber bullets, badly injuring several.[42]

40 Alexander Mayer-Rieckh, "Guarantees of Non-Recurrence: An Approximation," *Human Rights Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2017): 416–448.

41 "Newcastle Ikwezi Mining's Toxic Heritage in KZN Leads to Poisoned Waters," Macua, 6 November 2024, **https://macua.org.za/2024/11/06/newcastle-ikwezi-minings-toxic-heritage-in-kzn-leads-to-poisoned-waters/**

42 "Ikwezi Coal Mine: Protesting Community Members Shot at and Injured by Police," groundWork, 9 May 2025, **https://groundwork.org.za/ikwezi-coal-mine-protesting-community-members-shot-at-and-injured-by-police/**

Given this context, participants worked to make their advocacy goals realistic and achievable within a short period of time, with the aim of building a relationship with mine personnel that could lead to additional advocacy and reparative change. They decided to focus on recommending that the mine dig boreholes for residents and construct windpumps for livestock, ensuring access to clean drinking water at a safe distance from the mine dam. They also decided to advocate with the Dannhauser municipality to hold the mine accountable for its legal obligations to protect and uplift the local community. If successful, these outcomes would have represented a move towards acknowledgement and reparation for climate harms on the part of the mine and local government, and served as a symbol of solidarity with residents in responding to climate change.

At this point, however, community facilitator Themba Khumalo, who had been supporting participants in developing the advocacy plan and is a Dannhauser-based environmental activist in his own right, reported that he had received anonymous death threats and instructions to stop putting pressure on the mine. Environmental activists in South Africa broadly and the KwaZulu-Natal province specifically, particularly those focusing on mining operations, commonly face death threats, intimidation, violence and assassination.[43] Appalled but not very surprised, we decided to follow CSVR's security protocols and shifted our advocacy focus to another equally important goal. We see this as a missed opportunity for private and public sector stakeholders not only to demonstrate their compliance, if not commitment, to the law as laid out in the Climate Change Act, but also to acknowledge the pressing need to make changes in response to the severe climate impacts in the community.

The participants throughout the initiative had remarked that the people most affected by climate harms have experiences and solutions that experts and policymakers might not even consider.[44] We therefore focused our renewed advocacy efforts on enabling the Newcastle

43 Naledi Sikhakhane, "KZN's Environmental Human Rights Defenders Face Murder, Threats, Intimidation – Here Are Their Stories," Daily Maverick, 9 December 2024, **https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-12-09-kzn-environmental-human-rights-defenders-deadly-calling/**

44 See the participants' comments in Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, "Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice: A Climate Harms Commemoration," video, 28 November 2025, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DLdffCtrFU**

and Dannhauser municipal councils and administrations to mainstream active participation by residents in developing climate change responses. These responses would address not only moments of disaster such as floods, but also the lasting climate harms the participants had identified.

Another thing that would help us, that would address one of the things that makes us vulnerable, is that [government] fulfil their promises to people who have been harmed by climate change. They promise them houses, but they don't do them justice like they promised. People wait for reparations that won't come, until the time comes for the weather conditions to change again.

– Akhona Mlangeni

Local government is usually the first and main official entry point for communities dealing with climate impacts. Participants noted that their municipalities, as well as occasionally provincial and national government offices, are responsive primarily in the period immediately following a climate disaster, particularly severe floods. Officials make public statements and distribute 'food parcels' to affected families. However, said participants, they then tend to disappear without more substantive engagement – until the next catastrophe. For this reason, participants chose to advocate for more consistent and in-depth engagement, through participatory development, implementation and monitoring of local government climate change responses, which can then link to higher-level state interventions.

In a resulting policy brief, we recommend enhancing existing municipal structures and procedures in the following ways:

- conducting community-led assessments to map climate harms, stakeholders and entry points;
- establishing representative advisory councils on climate change that include at least three survivors of different ages, genders and backgrounds;
- adopting participatory design and budgeting of community-identified climate actions;
- mainstreaming participatory climate change responses in municipalities' integrated development plans;
- organising regular community monitoring meetings; and
- investing in capacity building and accessible communication on climate change issues.

These recommendations are linked to provisions in the above-mentioned Local Government: Municipal Systems Act.[45]

A major factor encouraging this advocacy was the interest of municipal officials in the initiative's activities. The two municipalities had relationships with several core participants before the initiative began, having committed to providing basic equipment to residents conducting clean-up campaigns in the area. Members of the Newcastle and Dannhauser municipal (and ward) councils and administrations, including from the Disaster Management Department, attended our transitional justice measures and on occasion addressed the participants, noting a commitment to partnering with community members to address climate change in the area. Several attended advocacy meetings with the team, and one agreed to be interviewed for an initiative video.[46]

45 Jasmina Brankovic, "Active Public Participation: The Key to Effective Climate Action at the Municipal Level," Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation Policy Brief (2025), **https://www.csvr.org.za/active-public-participation-the-key-to-effective-climate-action-at-the-municipal-level/**

46 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, "Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice: A Community-Led Memorial for Climate Harms," video, 15 July 2025, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ta1ykZbCA7Y**

Moreover, the councils agreed to identify a public site for the climate harms memorial and provide for its upkeep. Municipal officials gave speeches at a major public event we organised in Newcastle, asserting the municipalities' trust in community-led climate change responses. While the initiative would have gone ahead without their support, the relationships we developed with the municipalities served to strengthen the public legitimacy of the transitional justice measures and provided a sense of progress and credibility to the participants, inspiring an ongoing commitment to community-led climate action.

Other key stakeholders in the area similarly joined and supported the initiative, including religious leaders, traditional authorities and healers, owners of small businesses, agricultural landowners, civil society organisation staff, school governing board members, and community policing forum representatives, among others. These stakeholders – who are politically, economically and socially influential in the area – are crucial to supporting community-led climate action, and thus to the sustainability of this initiative.

Finally, we launched a two-week communications campaign consisting of social media posts and media interviews, including with two community radio stations. We did this to reach a wider audience with our messages about the value of using transformative transitional justice to address past climate harms and foster solidarity to prevent future climate harms, while highlighting the importance of climate policies and practices that are co-designed and co-implemented by those most affected by climate change.

Findings on Climate Change and Responses

Having outlined what a transformative transitional justice process for climate harms looks like and how we responded to emerging issues, in this section the discussion focuses on participants' understandings of climate change causes, the range of harms they and other residents have experienced, and solutions they shared.

Causes

Throughout our initiative, participants looked at climate change through the lens of their lived experiences. Asserting that it is caused by **human activity**, they described climate change in terms of acute alterations in local weather patterns, resulting in sudden and severe rainfall and flooding, as well as extreme heat and frequent droughts. Participants connected the international, national and local dimensions of climate change, arguing that emissions caused by burning coal, oil and gas have led to a rise in **greenhouse gases**, global warming and changes in the weather, while various actors have not done enough to address them.

Many noted that it is predominantly European countries and the United States that have contributed to climate change through their **historical and ongoing emissions**, while the impacts are hitting hardest the countries and communities that contributed the least. For this reason, they argued that these states and the international institutions they dominate bear greater moral and financial responsibility for climate change mitigation, adaptation and addressing loss and damage, and the obligation to learn from and provide redress to those affected most by climate harms.

I think that the steps we need to take are to reduce the amount of energy we use, these greenhouse gases, the electricity. ... It would be very helpful to preserve and protect our nature and to use the land wisely. We know that as climate change is taking place in our world, we know that our land is eroding. However, there is something we can do to make sure that there are a number of crops that can still be grown near home.

– Gcinile Kubheka

Many participants, particularly those from Dannhauser, discussed the **impacts of mining**, noting that the industry's use of fossil fuels and energy-intensive operations contribute significantly to climate change across the globe. Turning to the Ikwezi mine, participants said its operations have damaged local ecosystems. They argued that mine byproducts seep into the groundwater and nearby rivers, which residents use to water livestock and crops, as well as perform cultural rituals. Coal and dust pollution from the mine causes chronic respiratory problems, while coal burning worsens air quality. In addition, they said the mine is causing housing and infrastructure damage, with blasting cracking foundations and heavy vehicles damaging roads and bridges. Climate-related floods and droughts spread and compound these impacts on ecosystem services, health, housing and infrastructure, worsening them by many degrees. For participants, it is clear that the private sector must take more responsibility for redressing climate harms, while the public sector must do more to ensure that corporations meet their obligations to affected communities.

Participants also argued that local government's **inadequate climate planning and enforcement** of environmental regulations is contributing to climate impacts. In addition to

failing to hold the mining industry accountable, participants pointed to the municipalities' lack of climate preparedness and effective early warning systems. Many noted that the municipalities are lax on: urban planning, with residents continuing to build housing in flood zones, even as population numbers rise; infrastructure maintenance, with ageing roads, bridges, buildings and sewage systems buckling under floodwater, even as poor drainage worsens flooding; and waste management, with trash building up and encouraging waste burning that releases greenhouse gases and pollutants.

How can we find peace for those people who have been harmed? First of all, people can find peace by talking to someone. When they talk, they are doing what they need to do to be okay. Don't lock things up inside yourself, because they fester and eat you up little by little.

– Melusi Skakane

In addition, participants reflected that area residents – themselves included – also contribute to climate change and its harms. They discussed **residents' habits** of burning tyres and waste as well as dumping waste around the communities, particularly in waterways. They noted that residents contribute to deforestation, mentioning also that certain traditional healers harvest medicinal plants in unsustainable ways that lead to biodiversity loss. A number of participants noted that while some residents are not aware of the causes of and contributors to climate change, many are aware but find it difficult to prioritise climate action in the face of other daily challenges. In light of the profound climate harms occurring in the area, some residents remarked that climate change is a manifestation of God's anger and a response to the moral failings of individuals and society.

Overall, however, participants argued that climate change is caused by government and corporate actors at the international level and exacerbated by inadequate and overly top-down responses by national actors, including at the local level.

Harms

The initiative created supportive spaces for participants to share the climate harms they and other area residents have experienced. The harms – which are graver and more wide-ranging and long-lasting than popularly believed – include loss of life, homes, belongings, livelihoods, agricultural practices, food security, education, infrastructure, personal security, physical health, mental health, and cultural and spiritual practices. Older participants reported that residents have been suffering climate harms for years, yet noted that these have become more frequent and hard hitting.

The main harm participants emphasised to show the severity of climate change is loss of **life**. In recent years, a number of people, including children, have died by drowning as a direct or indirect result of extreme rainfall and flooding in the area.[47] Participants reflected that people lost their lives when floodwater swept them away or they were unable to escape flooded homes

47 See Quinton Boucher, "Two Dannhauser Residents and One Infant from Newcastle Passes Away Due to Rains," Newcastillian News, 14 February 2023, **https://newcastillian.com/2023/02/14/two-dannhauser-residents-and-one-infant-from-newcastle-passes-away-due-to-rains/**; "Woman Drowns After Taxi Is Swept Away in Fast Flowing River," Northern Natal News, 17 April 2025, **https://www.citizen.co.za/northern-natal-news/news-headlines/local-news/2025/04/17/woman-drowns-after-taxi-is-swept-away-in-fast-flowing-river/;** Climate Issue 2025, "November 9, 2025: Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," Instagram post, 9 November 2025, **https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQ9QuebgLOj/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4MTIwNjQ2YQ==**

or vehicles. Participants also noted that flooding slowed emergency response times, hindered rescue efforts, and caused further suffering when the recovery of bodies took a long time. Families have been left to deal with their grief and loss, including in some cases of the main caretaker or breadwinner.

Residents have lost **homes and belongings**. Participants recalled that as water levels rose and river banks eroded, houses, especially in informal settlements, were flooded and many fully or partially collapsed. Possessions carefully gathered over a lifetime were damaged or destroyed. Personal and business vehicles were ruined. Those affected were forced to choose between rebuilding in a flood-prone zone or being displaced to another area and starting from scratch in unfamiliar surroundings – far from established sources of income, education and social support. While the government may provide immediate relief in the form of food and essential supplies, inadequate planning and resources have meant that repairs to damaged housing and post-displacement resettlement have been too slow to be practicable for affected families.

Climate harms also entail loss of **livelihoods** in many forms. Participants who relied on renting out rooms in destroyed homes were left to cope with the loss of this core income. Businesses were damaged or ruined, which has affected both owners and employees. People lost their jobs or pay because frequent flooding (and at times extreme heat) interfered with their getting to work.

Residents who rely on **agricultural practices** have struggled to survive. Changing weather patterns, from prolonged droughts to excessive rainfall, have severely affected crop production. Participants noted that some crops that previously were staples, including potatoes and certain legumes, no longer grow in the area. Residents with gardens or farms who lived off their produce and had the option of selling the excess can no longer rely on this source of food and income. Residents with livestock watched them die due to heat, cold, flooding, ruined fodder, unexpected illnesses and worsening water and air pollution, which similarly affected those residents' access to food and an income.

Participants said that residents are forced to buy foodstuffs they previously grew or traded, which are more expensive than before due to scarcity and the higher cost of living. Residents already vulnerable to **food insecurity** are left suffering from hunger and the persistent threat of hunger. Participants also commented that climate-related changes in the environment have affected wild fauna and flora, which they said has further devastated the local ecosystem.

Together, participants pointed out, these harms have led to another climate harm, which is loss of **education** and skills. Children and young people have struggled to access schools and training centres during floods. Displacement affected their enrolment and attendance. Books and other educational materials were damaged or destroyed, while food insecurity affected performance. In some cases, educational institutions and centres were damaged or destroyed and thus forced to close. Young participants commented that these climate impacts have caused many to fall behind and affected their future chances of employment.

Schools are not the only type of **infrastructure** affected by climate impacts. According to participants, local roads and bridges have been washed away or heavily damaged, which has disrupted transportation networks, affected freedom of movement, and reduced residents' access to employment, education, healthcare and other essentials. Hospitals, clinics, police stations, municipal buildings, community halls and other government structures have been similarly affected, reducing access to public services. Residents' **personal security** has suffered, due to slower emergency response times, increased travel hazards and risk of accidents, and greater vulnerability to crime and violence amid these disruptions. Participants expressed concern that continued infrastructure degradation would leave them even more vulnerable to future climate disasters.

Linked to infrastructure-related climate harms is loss of **physical health**. Climate-related barriers to access to health centres and medication are affecting the healthcare system in the area and worsening the consequences of chronic illnesses, accidents and other medical crises. Water and air pollution exacerbated by extreme weather events are increasing incidence of diarrhoeal and respiratory illnesses. Participants noted that this is particularly affecting children and older persons in the area, including because older persons are often the main caregivers to young children. They added that older persons and people with mobility issues are especially vulnerable to climate risks and their health impacts.

In addition to physical health issues, participants raised **mental health** challenges as a key climate harm. They discussed the fear and anxiety they experience every time it rains heavily, remembering climate harms that occurred in the past and worrying about loved ones. Many have felt trapped and helpless, afraid to leave their homes while fearing what could happen if they stayed in their houses. This trauma, which keeps being triggered, has led to anxiety, depression, behavioural changes and other lasting challenges, which affect not only the individual but also the family and community, including across generations. The trauma has been exacerbated by the full range of losses discussed above. Yet the demands of daily life and limited access to formal MHPSS services mean that residents do not have the opportunity to deal with their trauma, except by providing informal support to each other.

One important harm that contributes to mental health challenges is the loss of **cultural and spiritual practices** occasioned by climate impacts. Participants shared that family graves and tombstones have been damaged by flooding and in many cases completely washed away. In

addition to disturbing the rest of buried loved ones, this climate impact is disrupting practices that nurture the link between the living and their ancestors and ensure a family's ongoing well-being. Moreover, climate-related displacement often takes residents away from their families' burial sites, while some choose to remain in hazardous locations in order to maintain that connection. Finally, climate impacts have damaged churches and other community gathering places, interrupting religious and support services and tearing the social fabric.

Reflecting on these manifold climate harms, one participant noted that they make it difficult simply to function and go about daily life. This is especially the case as residents face multiple other challenges that come with living in marginalised communities. Participants argued that while people worldwide are aware of climate disasters, many do not see the profound and lasting harms brought by both spectacular and everyday climate impacts. They emphasised that it is the breadth of experience individuals and communities affected by climate harms have that enables them to develop contextualised solutions that better contribute to climate justice.

Solutions

The participants' solutions – which include both existing and envisioned efforts – directly relate to the harms they identified. They promote bottom-up international climate action, historical accountability and redress for carbon emissions, education and knowledge exchange, multisectoral coalitions, enforcement of climate change provisions, participatory local government climate action, climate-wise practices, and MHPSS and other forms of support. Collectively, they reflect a strong link between climate action and social well-being, highlighting the communities' desire for a more sustainable and equitable future. Furthermore, by involving various stakeholders, from residents and government departments to private businesses and

international donors, participants stressed that climate action must be collaborative, inclusive and tailored to local needs to build long-term resilience.

From the global to the local level, participants started with the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, adapt to the changes brought by climate change, and address the losses and harms it has driven. Highlighting climate policies and practices, and the role of states and corporations in particular, they advocated for ambitious and **coordinated international climate action**, led and informed by countries and communities that have been most affected. Some advocated specifically for a shift towards green energy to reduce dependency on fossil fuels and cut household energy costs, while spurring a just transition and job creation.

We use transitional justice to ensure climate justice, so that the issues that have happened in the past are acknowledged and addressed to avoid further harms from the future.

– Sibongile Ngema

Yet, participants noted that technicist and market-driven climate action is inadequate, arguing for measures that ensure **accountability and redress** for the historical injustices and inequalities at the international and national levels that both drive and exacerbate climate harms. Advocating for climate justice, therefore, they acknowledged transitional justice as a tested way to address the climate harms of the past and prevent further harms, while eliciting knowledge and prompting mobilisation for a fairer, more climate-resilient future.

While recognising the contributions of climate experts, participants argued that affected communities are deeply familiar with the range of challenges they face on a daily basis and have the local knowledge, resources and networks to respond effectively. Reflecting on their own experience of learning from each other, they highlighted the importance of formal and informal education and **knowledge exchange** about climate change and climate action. In addition, they highlighted the value in strong and **diverse coalitions** of stakeholders from different sectors and backgrounds – with affected community members working alongside government officials, women's collectives, religious leaders, traditional authorities, businesspeople, civil society representatives, educators and others – who are able to learn from each other and coordinate efforts to influence policy and practice at multiple levels.

Looking more specifically at South African government climate change responses, they recommended reforms to the national curriculum to include **climate education** and climate justice content, enabling future generations to better understand and address the challenges they face. They emphasised the need for **better data collection** not only on climate change and impacts but also on the full range of climate harms suffered by the population, particularly information that has been overlooked and could validate community experiences and improve climate change responses. Moreover, participants stressed that the climate institutions and policies the government has in place – along with development, environmental protection, corporate governance and other climate-relevant frameworks – will never be effective without better designed and funded **implementation and enforcement** measures.

Participants also asserted that climate change and harms will continue to devastate the country until the national government invests in realising **transformative frameworks** and policies that better address the structural inequalities entrenched by colonialism and apartheid. Despite more than 30 years of democracy, the majority of area residents continue to wrestle with the socioeconomic constraints and exclusion their grandparents experienced. For them, responding

to climate change as envisioned in the Climate Change Act requires acknowledgement of the intimate, intersectional and intergenerational connections between climate vulnerabilities and marginalisation. One cannot be successfully addressed without the other.

Regarding local government services and interventions, participants called for an effective **early warning system**, suggesting the installation of public notice boards to disseminate timely information about extreme weather to increase preparedness and reduce harm. They recommended the municipality focus on **climate-sensitive urban and development planning**, greening and reforestation initiatives, proper waste management, and improved infrastructure maintenance. Participants advocated for **sustainable public transport** options and a cycling infrastructure, designed to reduce emissions, promote healthier lifestyles, and ensure mobility. They also advocated for measures to ensure that residents can access healthcare whatever the weather conditions, presenting **mobile clinics** as a workable solution. Moreover, they insisted that government play a greater role in promoting and enforcing **corporate compliance**.

Crucially, participants advocated for **participatory climate change response development** and implementation, focusing on the municipal level. Not requiring reinvention of the wheel, this entails building on and reforming existing state frameworks, structures and procedures to ensure that community members affected by climate harms lead on and contribute to the assessment, design, planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of local government's climate initiatives. They noted that an inclusive approach results in responses that better address the diverse needs of different groups in the community, including women, youth and older persons. Participants further insisted that municipal councils and administrations need to be more consistently physically present in communities, instead of showing up only when disaster strikes.[48] For them, local government is the first stop to broader impact, including at

48 For more details, see Brankovic, 2025.

the provincial and national levels – and they emphasise that municipalities will gain buy-in and support from residents in collaborating with them to address climate change.

Participants identified numerous ways in which community members themselves can and do come together to deal with climate harms, using backwards- and forward-looking measures. Our initiative shows residents' interest in and commitment to acknowledging and **learning from past climate harms**, through memorialisation, truth-telling, reparative and accountability efforts. Participants also linked such measures to education, of children and young people as well as the broader public, arguing that they provide the opportunity to inspire and mobilise community members to prevent climate harms in the long term, including through advocacy for government reform and policy change. Community-based education occurs via word of mouth, workshops, exhibitions, arts-based practices, school programmes, social media posts and a range of other means.

As participants noted, many residents are already conducting community clean-up campaigns, applying better waste management and recycling practices, and ceasing to burn tyres and other refuse in the area. They are trying to reduce their fossil fuel and electricity consumption, where possible, and raising awareness of the need to do so in the community, including with reference to decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. They are **adapting** their housing to make it more flood and heat resistant. Participants said residents are working to scale up these efforts and make them common practice across the area, while linking them to increased economic security where possible. They are also attempting to diversify their income sources in order to lessen the economic shocks of climate harms.

[The process] needs to be designed by the community members, as they are the victims of the climate change, as they will bring the true evidence of what exactly happened in their areas and how it's affected them, to bring transformation and also to teach the future generation about the harms of the climate change. Not the experts to come and assume what has happened in the area.

– Nelisiwe Mnguni

Moreover, residents are changing their agricultural practices. They are experimenting with different crops and various planting techniques – both new and based on ancestral farming practices – to address poorly growing crops and food insecurity. They are using more **climate-wise practices** with livestock, ranging from keeping livestock in flood-proof areas to cleaning up the effects of water pollution. These community solutions require large and small adjustments, and entail a significant amount of detail specific to the conditions in Newcastle and Dannhauser.

A major theme in the discussions was the reality of – and the greater need for – **community solidarity and mutual support**, with participants asserting that uniting residents is essential for building resilience against climate harms. They also emphasised the importance of access to information on resources and programmes already available in the area that could help, including civil society organisations, community initiatives, service providers, social workers, training programmes and so forth. These resources are seen as vital to raising awareness, accessing technical information and guidance, mobilising resources, and advocating for change, as well as offering direct support in areas such as disaster relief and capacity building.

An important element of community solidarity and mobilisation, according to participants, is MHPSS. They noted the need for easier access to state and civil society mental health professionals to help residents address the trauma of repeated and overlapping climate harms, which would also help them focus on mitigating further harms. This requires lowering the stigma of seeking MHPSS services. Moreover, participants discussed ways in which residents already help each other informally deal with their trauma, using shared community, religious, spiritual and other practices, and the benefits of both acknowledging and strengthening this mutual support as a font of resilience. Fundamentally, participants recognised the deep need for healing in communities affected by climate harms.

Many of the solutions asserted by participants would not have been shared and documented – and thereby become publicly visible – without the transformative transitional justice process we implemented. Typically, state and civil society experts develop climate change responses, which may overlap with some community-identified solutions or include community inputs but, as participants noted, do not grasp the full range of contextual obstacles and opportunities. This makes them more limited than community-led climate responses, and therefore inadequate as stand-alone efforts. Recognising the causes of climate change and the range of climate harms they spur, the measures we implemented brought to light just some of the solutions awaiting acknowledgement within affected communities, and the transformative potential they hold.

Conclusion and Lessons Learnt

As the first explicitly transitional justice process for climate harms, developed using a transformative approach, the Newcastle and Dannhauser initiative can serve as a precedent. It shows that climate impacts go beyond spectacular disasters and economic losses, leading to a wide range of intimate and lasting climate harms that negatively affect residents' lives as individuals, families and communities.

The process demonstrates the depth of experience that affected community members have in relation to climate change and harms, which enables them to perceive opportunities and develop contextualised solutions that might not be considered by climate experts and other stakeholders. Furthermore, it reveals the power of backwards-looking measures that acknowledge and enable learning from past climate harms, combined with forward-looking measures that spur mobilisation and build solidarity for preventing and mitigating future climate harms.

Overall, the initiative indicates the value of using transitional justice as a novel way to address climate change. Transitional justice has the capacity to focus stakeholders on reducing climate *harms* within the context of ongoing climate impacts, and to tackle redress amid systemic challenges and diffuse harms. Using a transformative approach, moreover, enables transitional justice to acknowledge the intersectional and intergenerational nature of climate impacts, prioritise local-level ideas and resources, promote iterative and participatory climate change responses, and recognise the benefits of pluralism in beliefs and practices when attempting to deal with the climate crisis.

Participants in Newcastle and Dannhauser witnessed transformation in their internal power relations, as well as their perceptions of hierarchies of knowledge. They recognised that the

knowledge of those affected by climate harms – their knowledge – has value both separately from and as a contributor to expert knowledge. As representatives of the area municipal councils and administrations increasingly bought into the process, participants also saw a rising willingness among local stakeholders to work with residents in a collaborative way to develop climate change responses. They saw potential for government actors at the local, provincial and national levels in South Africa to embrace a similar approach and even champion the resulting ideas and practices via regional and international climate platforms.

By foregrounding and enabling the cross-pollination of ideas and practices developed by those affected by climate harms among diverse actors, transformative transitional justice can open a pathway to normalising acknowledgement, restorative responsibility and cross-sectoral solidarity, possibly including among the government and corporate actors most implicated in driving historical emissions and ongoing climate change. This pathway towards climate justice calls for more exploration.

In putting the truth-telling, commemoration, memorial and reform-focused advocacy measures into practice, we also learnt a number of process-related lessons that might be useful to affected communities, practitioners and other stakeholders contemplating similar measures. From the start, we found that an equitable, 'collegial' relationship among those leading and taking part in such a process is key to achieving community buy-in and a sense of ownership, constructively managing internal conflicts and power dynamics, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the learning and mobilisation that the process elicits.

This type of relationship needs to be built and nurtured from day one, which relies on adopting a participatory ethos, in addition to using participatory facilitation methods.[49] It also requires a great deal of time for relationship building, as well as openness and adaptability to new ideas, shifting power dynamics, and emerging opportunities and challenges – even challenges as significant as a death threat.

Music, theatre, poetry and other arts-based practices help people express their experiences and share their knowledge regarding climate harms in a range of safe ways that enrich verbal discussions, while helping build relationships and trust through collaboration. In addition to allowing new and creative thinking to emerge, these practices help participants distil their key messages and communicate them to their chosen publics in an accessible way.[50]

In line with the participatory ethos, when participants receive an honorarium in recognition of their contributions to the process, they not only are better able to make arrangements to attend activities and cover transport and other costs, but they also see that their experiences and knowledge are valued and tend to become more invested in continuing the initiative in the long term.[51]

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49 See Simon Robins and Erik Wilson, "Participatory Methodologies with Victims: An Emancipatory Approach to Transitional Justice Research," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 30, no. 2 (2015): 219–236; Brankovic et al., 2020.

50 See Sherin Shefik, "Reimagining Transitional Justice through Participatory Art," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 12, no. 2 (2018): 314–333; Raquel Relvas, "From Pain to Paint: Art as a Voice for Justice," Open Global Rights, 3 June 2025, **https://www.openglobalrights.org/from-pain-to-paint-art-as-a-voice-for-justice/**

51 See Yanelisa Sishuba, Sindiswa Nunu, Nompumelelo Njana, Agnes Ngxukuma, Brian Mphahlele and Jasmina Brankovic, *Conducting Participatory Action Research with Apartheid Survivors: Lessons from 'Addressing Socioeconomic Drivers of Violence in Khulumani Communities'* (Cape Town: Khulumani Western Cape and Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017).

Finally, given the demands this type of process places on participants, MHPSS is a crucial component to be integrated into all activities from the beginning. This support better enables people affected by climate harms to acknowledge the psychological effects of such harms, to face and begin to heal from their climate change-related trauma, and to engage more actively in climate action. It entails providing counselling during activities, offering referrals to local MHPSS providers, sharing MHPSS resources, providing training in trauma-sensitive practices, and making space for regular discussions about mental health, among other efforts.[52]

Besides choosing to implement a new transformative transitional justice process for climate harms, affected communities and other stakeholders may look around and find that they are already, in fact, practising justice in transition. Collective storytelling, memorial activities, healing work, indigenous justice mechanisms, and other community-based efforts that enable acknowledgement, redress, accountability and shared responsibility for creating conditions that reduce climate harms – these can all be viewed as examples of transitional justice for climate justice. Recognition of the potential for learning and mobilisation in existing practices like these is a new key to revitalising climate action, from the local to the global.

52 For more on this, as well as incorporating MHPSS in contexts where it is unfamiliar or stigmatised, see Jasmina Brankovic, *Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support into Transitional Justice in The Gambia: Practitioner Perspectives* (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2021).

About the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

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The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) is an independent, non-governmental organisation established in South Africa in 1989. We are a multidisciplinary institute that seeks to understand and prevent violence, heal its effects and build sustainable peace at the community, national and regional levels. Through our research, advocacy and psychosocial support work and in collaboration with communities affected by violence, we seek to enhance state accountability, promote gender equality and build social cohesion, integration and active citizenship.