



A127 Building Sustainable Programs of Recovery and Identification of Human Remains — A Comparative Analysis of Forensic Programs: The Examples of Kosovo and Cyprus

Maria Mikellide, MA, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 19 Avenue de la Paix, 1202 Geneva, Geneva, SWITZERLAND*

After attending this presentation, attendees will gain a better understanding of the significance of local forensic capacity building in establishing successful programs of recovery and identification of human remains, as learned by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

This presentation will impact the forensic science community as well as those involved in the humanitarian domain by drawing on lessons learned from past and existing forensic programs in order to identify the key elements that contribute to their development.

While acknowledging that success cannot be easily defined or quantified — especially in a context where a plethora of specialists and non-specialists are called to contribute to the process while an even greater number eagerly and apprehensively await for results — the goal of this study is to identify the markers of success as well as the context-specific adversities and socio-economic and socio-political parameters that define the trajectories of forensic programs.

For the purposes of this study, success will be assessed on the basis of: (1) operational continuity; (2) quality of forensic work by adhering to best professional standards; and, (3) activities performed (percentage of persons exhumed and identified).

The presentation will begin with a short historical overview of forensic activities from the 1980s to the present day, providing background from South America, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia before turning its focus to the specific examples of Kosovo and Cyprus.

The two European examples were selected based on similarities in context, including the scale and the demographics of the missing population. The island of Cyprus, with a population of 600,000 in 1960, experienced two periods of inter-communal armed conflict, during which approximately 2,000 individuals went missing; in Kosovo — with a population of two million — approximately 6,000 individuals went missing during the armed conflict that broke out in 1998, following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

By comparing the two contexts, where the scale is similar yet the approach is completely divergent — Kosovo as an immediate response program with shorter-term legal objectives and Cyprus as a longer-term program with humanitarian objectives — the goal of this study is to extrapolate and consolidate the factors at play and, through statistical analyses and comparison with other contexts, scientifically corroborate the hypothesis that building local capacity is key to success.

In order to achieve the above, the variables that will be looked at include: (1) the nature of the conflict (armed conflict/enforced disappearances); (2) political will; (3) availability of funding; (4) nature of the mandate (legal/humanitarian); (5) involvement of international agencies (external forensic personnel); (6) socio-economic circumstances; (7) staff turnover; and, (8) training and involvement of local forensic practitioners.

Although it has been the long-held rhetoric among forensic experts, international aid agencies, and other stakeholders that investing in local capacity is key to sustainability, there remains a significant gap in the scientific literature — especially for the two contexts upon which this presentation focuses — to scientifically support the argument and to document the long-term practical implications of the (non)involvement of local practitioners and the overreliance on external help. Through both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study seeks to address this gap, contribute to the historical documentation of the evolution of forensic programs, and provide recommendations for the establishment of future ones.

Data for this study have been collected from ICRC archives, scientific articles and book chapters, websites of international agencies, as well as through interviews with the forensic and non-forensic personnel who provided invaluable and previously unpublished material.

With the on-going conflict in a great part of the world today and 30 years since the application of forensic principles to human rights investigations in Argentina, which saw Clyde Snow's commitment and vision to train a group of local young students, this presentation hopes to build on the collective experience of the forensic community, empower a new generation of forensic scientists, and encourage international organizations to ensure that local authorities assume greater responsibility and local ownership.

Humanitarian Forensics, Forensic Capacity Building, Forensic Strategies