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Collective Wounds: Societal trauma and the Karabakh conflict

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Independent Peace Associates

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About Independent Peace Associates

Independent Peace Associates (Indie Peace), is a conflict transformation organisation specialising in research and analysis, training and facilitation of dialogue to build confidence between communities affected by conflict. Our geographic expertise is mainly in the former Soviet Union, and our principle is to work inclusively in cooperation with all players and across the multiple conflict-divides in the wider region.

We offer a transformational peacebuilding model that aims to build intellectual and emotional capital for peaceful social change. Our analysis acknowledges the role of perceptions, emotions and human subjectivity, and our interventions foster greater reflectiveness and critical thinking. We believe that transformation on an individual level can influence change on the social and political levels. Only by understanding all dimensions of a conflict – its psychological, social, political, economic, ethnic, historical, gendered, cultural and other roots – can we develop a conflict-sensitive vision, a strategy to build sustainable peace.

Indie Peace is much more than its founders – we work with peace practitioners from around the world who share our vision and values.

Our approach encompasses the following:

- Researching and analysing conflict causes, consequences and dynamics
- Facilitating dialogue processes and exchange between stakeholders in conflict
- Consultancy on conflict transformation for conflict stakeholders, third-party mediators
- Training in conflict-sensitivity, mediation, critical thinking, community engagement
- Peacebuilding project management, monitoring and evaluation.

Indie Peace

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About the author

Larissa Sotieva has over 25 years' experience managing humanitarian, conflict transformation and civic engagement programmes in the former Soviet Union and has a wealth of expertise in political and conflict analysis, facilitation of research and cross-conflict dialogue processes, including high level policy dialogues. Larissa has worked for a number of international organisations in Russia in the North Caucasus and also in the South Caucasus, Central Asia and Ukraine. Between 2006 and 2019, Larissa worked as senior adviser for the Eurasia region with International Alert, after which she founded Independent Peace Associates.

Place names
Place names and spellings are a source of contention in the Karabakh context. In this paper we use neutral spelling where practical, with the exception of direct quotes which use the phrasing of the speaker in question.

Introduction

> ***"We have to understand that we cannot bring our loved ones back by continuing to kill others. But it seems that's something hard to admit to ourselves."***
>
> Displaced Azerbaijani, female, age 52

This study is an attempt to examine the role of societal trauma in the context of the conflict surrounding the contested territory of Nagorny Karabakh in the South Caucasus, to understand its impact both on individuals and the societies, and how this might subsequently affect the overall dynamics of the conflict.

The Karabakh war of 27 September to 9 November 2020 completely changed the humanitarian, political and geopolitical context in the region. The escalation of military activity, long predicted after years of increasing tensions, nevertheless took everyone by surprise. Over 44 days, Azerbaijan succeeded in returning control of many of the lands that it had lost during the first Karabakh war of 1992-1994. As many as 7,000 were killed in action on all sides, and more than 170 civilians. Some 130,000 were displaced, the majority of them Armenians in Nagorny Karabakh. A Russian-brokered ceasefire mandated the deployment of some 2,000 Russian peacekeepers to the region. While Azerbaijan has started the process of rehabilitation of its regained territories, preparing for resettlement, it is still unclear when and whether hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the first war will be able to return. Meanwhile, the outcome of the war triggered a political crisis in Armenia, and Karabakh Armenians – both those who remain and those displaced – experience heightened political and human insecurity, and an uncertain future.

The renewal of hostilities and the extent of the human losses on all sides have completely undermined and discredited past efforts aimed at peaceful resolution or transformation of the conflict. The complete turnaround in positions and the advantages held by the respective sides have fundamentally changed the premise for peacebuilding, at least at the political level. On a civil level, too, there is a need for lessons to be learned, for new analysis and new approaches towards peaceful coexistence.

This study aims to analyse the context from a perspective that has been neglected in the past and is particularly pertinent in the relatively recent aftermath of a major war. The focus is on societal trauma, something which has not always been taken seriously by those working on post-war rehabilitation nor by the individuals affected, yet trauma influences how we as individuals and as societies function both during and after violent conflict. While individual trauma has been well-studied, and a wide range of psychotherapeutic tools and practices exist in this area, societal or collective trauma is frequently overlooked. International responses mainly focus on political and humanitarian issues.

This paper seeks to illustrate how trauma functions in the Karabakh conflict context, and to describe some of its indicators and characteristics: how trauma manifests both on a personal and societal level; how deeply it can affect even those who did not experience the horrors of war first-hand, i.e. those who are not part of the so-called 'primary trauma' group; and how, for example, those who have close emotional ties to victims of war or

were active observers of a traumatic event on the media or social media can experience a secondary trauma no less significant in emotional depth and impact than primary trauma.

By studying how trauma manifests itself in the conflict context, we bring a new psycho-sociological dimension to conflict analysis, broadening it out to enable emotions, or the 'human factor' to be taken into account. Comprehending the social condition and dispositions of the societies, the way they perceive their reality and look towards the future, is no less an important predictor of future events than a complex political, economic and geopolitical analysis.

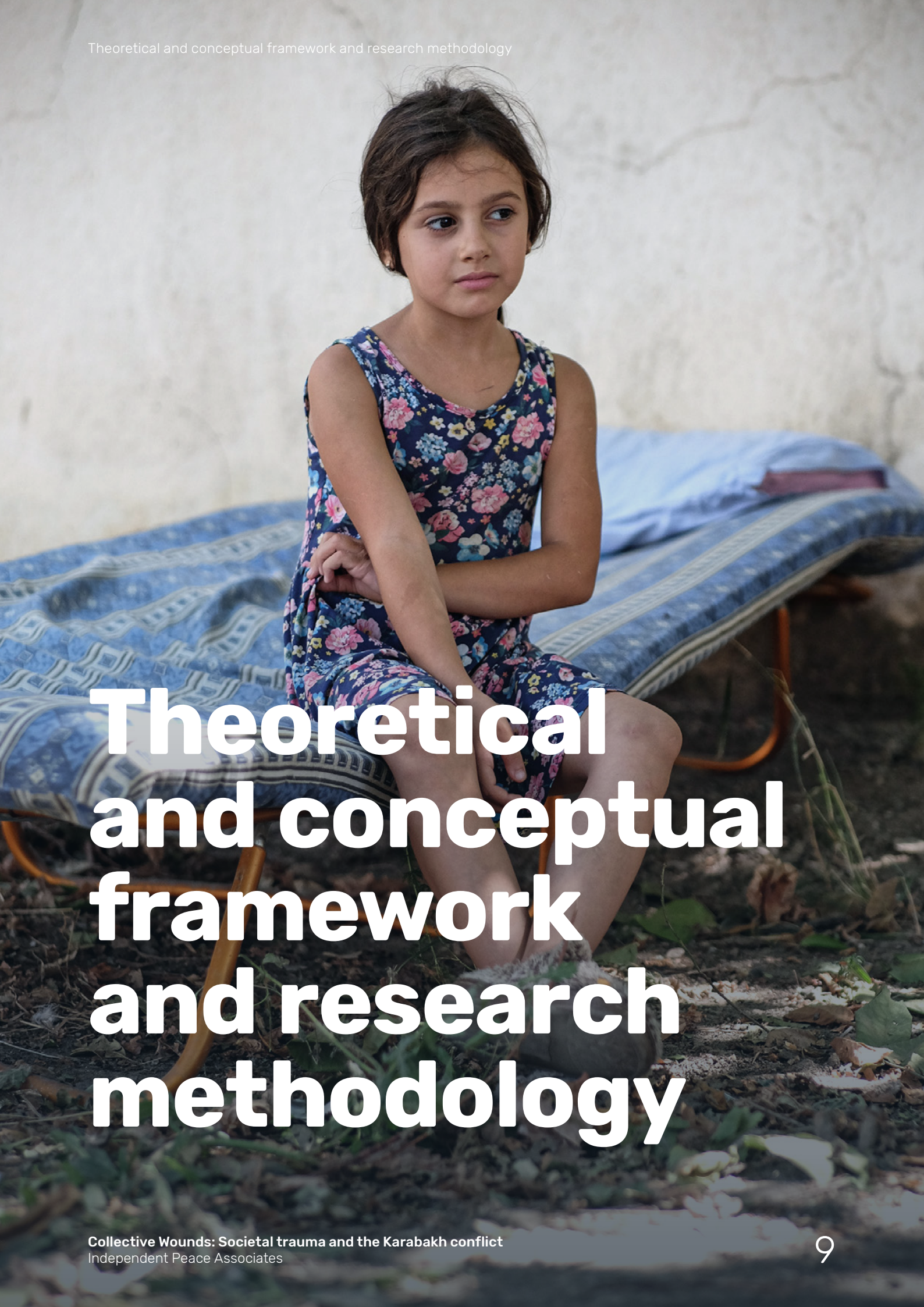
An understanding of what drives people in societies that have experienced traumatic events – their anxieties, fears, individual needs and how these interact or conflict with societal needs when traumatising factors are present – is important for conflict analysis and thus for conflict transformation. Such an approach can help explain societal trends, or why certain unexpected events take place, as well as open up new perspectives on working with the legacy of conflict.

Making sense of trauma can be key to finding ways toward both personal healing and societal rehabilitation. Furthermore, an analysis that highlights the intersection between psychological, social, and political can provide new insight and help identify ways forward for peaceful conflict resolution.

Finally, it is important to stress that trauma influences all sides' interpretation of conflict, regardless of victor or loser status. Analysing the conflict through the lens of societal trauma can also shed light on similarities and commonalities in Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. Indeed, this conflict has become unique in terms of the impact of trauma, with both sides having experienced both victory and defeat in different periods.

> ***"We understand the Armenians – we lived through this humiliation too... We feel sorry for them. We went through it."***

> ***"For 30 years we were the victors, but we did not treat them like this, did not humiliate them, did not trample them underfoot the way they are doing to us now."***



Theoretical and conceptual framework and research methodology

"Laughter saved us during the war. Uncontrollable, coming out of nowhere. We knew that any one of us could die at any minute, and yet we laughed ourselves to tears..."

Armenian veteran of the 2020 Karabakh war describes a spontaneous coping mechanism which enabled him and fellow soldiers to survive psychologically in the face of horror

There is no consensus on the concept of societal trauma, how precisely it manifests itself in public life.

There is very little literature on this specifically on the Karabakh context – though there is a burgeoning literature on historical, transgenerational trauma in the context of the Armenian genocide, little of this is applied to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, focusing primarily on Armenian-Turkish relations.[1] Similarly, there is little literature that explores how trauma and peacebuilding can be linked.[2] During the post-war restoration period, the focus is usually on political, infrastructural and humanitarian aspects of rehabilitation. While all these aspects are pertinent in the Karabakh context, what is missing is the understanding of how trauma shapes the new social and political landscape in the immediate aftermath of war, and thus prospects for peace.

Societal trauma is highly context-specific, and it can be difficult to distinguish between different origins of trauma, especially in the Caucasus context, which has a long history of wars, displacement, Soviet rule and collapse, economic hardship, and protracted insecurity. The temptation to attribute all sorts of phenomena to 'trauma' and the pathologisation of societies should be avoided. Indeed, societies that have survived such upheavals can be quite resilient and have well developed coping mechanisms – though not all coping mechanisms are necessarily conducive to conflict resolution or transformation. For example, one aspect of resilience is the prevalence of a shared ideology through which people can find connection and support – but what if that shared ideology is based on collective victimhood, loss or despair and/or extremist or radical ideology?[3] In this paper, my intention is not necessarily to diagnose trauma, but to use it as a lens through which to explore how our individual and group psychology influence social, political and thus conflict dynamics.

An experience as traumatic as war destroys many of our beliefs and undermines our internal sense of security, that which has been established since childhood and gives most of us a feeling of protection and belonging in a social space where we can live and thrive and envisage our future. This sense of security is built upon several interrelated factors, such as where we were born, our home, parents, family, school, friends, work, nationality, country and so on. When this social system breaks down and no longer provides us with a sense of security, we start to engage in a process of seeking out and reconstituting new mechanisms of support.

Not all individuals who have experienced a traumatic event will suffer from 'trauma'. But when a person's normal coping mechanisms are overwhelmed, an affected person's behaviour can oscillate between over-stimulation and under-stimulation.

How an individual copes very much depends on the nature of the event(s), their individual resilience and available support systems, such as friends, family, as well as social and political validation of one's experience. This affords trauma a wider societal dimension, within a specific socio-political and historical context.[4] In a war context, the societies need to go through stages of grief for their loss, whether it is the loss of a loved one, a home, a way of life/worldview, or an expected future. The importance of such a process of mourning is in that it allows space for accepting a new reality, and consequently, for future growth and development. Where there is no space for this process of grieving, this can constitute a new form of trauma.

This study is concerned with societal or collective trauma, where the trauma is on a national or sub-national or transnational level in a way that "affects the fabric of society, the interaction within societies and the interaction with others."[5] Such collective trauma can be defined as being shaped by and producing collective narratives, emotions and mental models, norms or values – which in turn shape conflict dynamics. Collective narratives construct (new) post-war identities based on the outcome of the war. This is where post-war societies, especially in contexts of protracted conflict, are particularly vulnerable to political manipulation, as such narratives are propagated through mainstream political and public discourses. Furthermore, it becomes difficult to ascertain what is 'trauma', what are 'norms', and to distinguish between the societal and political dimensions of a conflict dynamic. Trauma can thus be understood in part as a construct, produced through social and political discourses after dramatic or catastrophic events, which constitute new political communities, in place of those that have been destroyed.[6]

Through the shaping of behaviour, trauma can change not only our own lives, but that of whole generations, altering the course of a society's history. Our unresolved traumas are passed down through family and collective narratives and emotions from generation to generation, becoming a public legacy and have the tendency to come back to the fore even many years later, bringing us and our societies back into the state they were in when they experienced the initial trauma. This can be used to escalate conflict, which many of the interviewees for this study believe is exactly what happened when military operations began in the Karabakh context in autumn 2020, making old tragedies, even those that happened a century ago, feel like they happened only yesterday.

Research methodology

This study was carried out between March to July 2021 during which time I interviewed 50 people from across the entire conflict region, reaching an even sample of various groups and sectors of society.[7]

Interviews were conducted online, and usually lasted up to two hours. All interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of trust and many interviewees would later come back to me with clarifications, advice, and even recommendations on other people to talk to.

These interviews would have been impossible to conduct without the enthusiasm and professionalism of local coordinators, who identified potential interviewees and held preliminary discussions with them to prepare them and explain the goals of the research. On a couple of occasions, the coordinators would translate if the interviewee did not speak Russian or English.

However, the topic is quite sensitive and even taboo in these societies, in which long-standing traditions and cultural norms continue to play important roles, and some people approached for interview declined. In particular, it was not possible to interview a single veteran from Azerbaijan.

This preparatory phase suggests that those who agreed to be interviewed already to some extent acknowledged the influence of trauma either on the societies or themselves and were open to discuss it.

Interviewees often offered positive feedback and all manner of questions during the interview. For example, interviewees in Karabakh were interested in what people outside of their context thought of the war. They were interested more in what ordinary people think, less so to hear about political motivations and country-specific interests or what was reported in the media, which they did not trust. For people who have had the foundations of their security destroyed, who feel so fundamentally disillusioned with everyone around them, any human solidarity is important while they find their footing again.

I had the opportunity to offer individual psychological support to interviewees through the services of therapists specialising in trauma from across the former Soviet Union. Some interviewees took up the offer, but others had difficulty finding a private space without other family members present, even for just one hour a week to talk to a psychologist.

Working with this team of psychologists was not only helpful to those individuals and their families. It also helped support the analysis, and to check preliminary conclusions against their observations, and develop recommendations on working with conflict through a trauma lens.

Notes

1. A 2021 publication by Pamela Steiner, *Collective Trauma and the Armenian Genocide Armenian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani Relations since 1839.* (London: Bloomsbury), does offer this angle, but not since the war in 2020.
2. An excellent overview is offered by König, U., Reimann, C. (2018) *Closing a gap in conflict transformation: Understanding collective and transgenerational trauma*.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 8.
5. Ibid.
6. An in-depth study by Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions After Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), explores how trauma and emotions shape political communities, including the way in which representation attempts to make traumatic events collectively meaningful. Based on study of the 2002 Bali bombing, 2004 South Asian tsunami, and South African legacy of apartheid, despite the wide variances in these contexts, there is quite some resonance for the Karabakh context.
7. A balance in terms of gender (56% female, 44% male), age (18-68), urban/rural, professionals (teachers, psychologists, journalists, civil society actors, representatives of former/current authorities etc.), as well as students, unemployed, homemakers, etc. I tried to reach those affected in various ways by the conflict (veterans, bereaved families, those displaced during the 2020 Karabakh war, and in the 1990s), though it is clear that the conflict touched everyone in various ways.

Research findings

The research findings have been broadly organised in terms of the individual, societal and political dimensions of trauma as people articulated them during interviews, though these are so interconnected that the distinction is not always clear cut.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that people and the societies exist amid a web of multiple contradictions and mutually exclusive concepts, which are in themselves sources of tension. After some initial presentation on individuals' self-reflection on trauma, and a broad snapshot of social dispositions, the report covers a number of cognitive and emotional tendencies evident, such as the avoidance of reality and attachment to trauma. One phenomenon that deserves attention is that of extremes in people's conceptual horizons, which leads to an erosion of constraining factors, resulting in a mentality that 'anything is possible' or reflected in 'all or nothing' thinking. The report also looks at context-related themes, such as the unpredictability of the current situation – and the lack of certainty in people's lives – as well as reflect on the nature of violence in the societies. Finally, the report takes a look at societal regulators of trauma, and the utilisation of trauma or political manipulation, but also how political and social dimensions merge to ensure the conflict becomes self-regulating.

Self-reflection on trauma

> ***"People are governed by only one instinct now – survival."***
>
> Female journalist, Karabakh, age 55

> ***"I don't sleep at night – I close my eyes and these horrors come back to me over and over."***
>
> Female teacher, internally displaced, Baku, 50

> ***"The children now are different; to them war is like air, like water, they know it so well... We dreamed of becoming doctors, teachers, but these kids have only war games in their heads, violence, a desire to kill, to win. During that short war in 2016 my 10-year-old grandson tried to comfort me: 'Don't worry, grandma, it's our side shooting.' He could tell where the gunfire was coming from by the sound."***
>
> Female teacher from Azerbaijan's border areas, age 55-60

One important consideration when seeking to understand war trauma is how people personally reflect on it, and on their own and others' experience. The majority of those I talked to preferred to reflect on how "people have changed", but very few were able to project that onto themselves, especially at the beginning of our conversation:

> ***"After this bloodbath I'm trying to carry on being who I used to be, although I know that I'm a different person now. But people around me say that I'm OK, I'm the same as before."***
>
> Ex-combatant, Armenia, age 25

Trauma becomes a worrying signal due to the lack of awareness of it, and the lack of knowledge of how it influences those who are traumatised and what to expect. In the collective

conscience, trauma is something that can be observed and contemplated, something that might go away by itself, leaving no imprint on people's lives or the lives of their descendants.

Here we can see a parallel with how people view the conflict itself and the possibilities of working on it: "What can we do here?... Only wait... It's all decided above... Maybe it will pass."

Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis viewed their traumatic experience from the point of view of the victim, and through layers of enemy images which have become entrenched over the years of conflict. The main defining characteristic they described was their sense of being out of control and the catastrophic nature of the situation:

> ***"This is what the Armenians are doing to us – they destroyed and mutilated the best of our gene pool, and we cannot develop."***

> ***"... It's not just Karabakh, soon there won't be any Armenia – the Turks have united and are set on completely destroying us."***

Societal dispositions

In this long, intense conflict the distinction between primary, secondary and generational trauma can often be blurred into a single complex emotional tangle. It is difficult to identify which traumatic factors were key for any given individual or society. Was it the bloody 44-day war of 2020, or the regular escalations and years of life between peace and war – which, in the public consciousness, hastened the beginning of a large-scale war. Or was it life in a debilitating and humiliating state of exile with no real possibility of integration?

> ***"For 30 years we had the sense there was no motherland, no home, only debilitating pain."***
> Internally displaced man, Baku, age 56

This whole series of different traumatic experiences since the 1990s gave rise to a societal demand for another, "final" war as a resolution to the conflict and a way to be rid of traumatic baggage. This tendency, desire for a further, final war is still evident to this day.

Summing up the ways the interviewees characterised themselves, their loved ones and their society, we can observe that both Armenian and Karabakh Armenian societies are prone to fairly strong polar emotions: grief, a sense of victimhood, and a feeling of being lost, illustrated by phrases such as "We lost not just land, or people, but ourselves... It's this sense of being lost." Also evident is anger and a desire to take revenge: "We have to win back our lands – we can't do it any other way. We as a people cannot be in this situation for long."

Judging by how these emotions are expressed, paying attention to those who are more vocal and active in public may result in a false interpretation of the moods and tendencies within the wider population.

The state of Azerbaijani society today can be described as triumphant in victory, in reaction to earlier humiliation, with this victory loudly declared every day, while other emotional components largely go ignored or minimised. This happens both subconsciously and intentionally. For example, even people's expressions of condolence to those who lost family members in the war are framed in politicised terms:

> ***"Azerbaijanis are the only nation on earth who congratulate a family that lost a son during the war."***
>
> Female psychologist, Azerbaijan, age 58

> ***"We are forever indebted to those who brought about victory, we are in debt to their parents."***
>
> Male psychologist, Azerbaijan, age 35

Cognitive characteristics – enemies/friends

> ***"We were hiding in a basement in Stepanakert during an air raid and I thought about the person who was dropping these bombs on us, what he was feeling and thinking at the time. I wanted to believe in something good, and so I thought that maybe he's a good person and doesn't want to do this, that he's forced to push the button. It made me feel a bit better in the moment. But after a month in Yerevan, after coming back home and seeing our house destroyed, my room in ruins... At that moment I understood, I felt in my body, how much I hate them. I could no longer entertain the thought that someone on their side might be a good person."***
>
> Female Student, Karabakh, age 20

> ***"I heard that some of them are also good people, but such are the rules of war – kill or be killed, and I'm ready to kill them..."***
>
> Blogger, Karabakh, age 28

Traumatic war experiences change our worldview, the values on which we have built our lives and our attitudes towards the world around us. Even though conflict gives rise to stereotypical thinking, black-and-white public rhetoric and judgements lacking nuance, in personal discussions one can often hear more critical self-reflective thoughts:

> ***"We're told that Armenians are the enemy, but I don't think so. They are just as much a victim of political elites and the ideology of their diaspora as we are. Your average Armenian guy doesn't want the war or my village. He has his own and all he wants is to raise his children in peace, just like me."***
>
> Internally displaced man, Azerbaijan, age 56

All interviewees, no matter what side they were on or their status, noted their disillusionment with international organisations (both governmental and non-governmental) expressing a lack of trust towards them and feelings of cynicism towards their actions. However, here too people made exceptions:

> ***"There are people there too that proved that they have a soul, compassion. That gives me hope."***
>
> Female student, Yerevan

Switching to generalisations and stereotypes helps simplify the processing of overwhelming information that trauma and conflict bring in its wake. It offers some security by creating a sense of involvement, group belonging, and of having a place in a society that shares your opinions. However, people who are able to find a sense of security outside their narrow reference group are more likely to speak critically about the mainstream view. They can identify parallel trends in the opponent societies, and a comparable emotional and cognitive backdrop that develops into a collective conflict regulatory mechanism.

Avoidance and rejection of reality

One coping mechanism after trauma, both during and after active hostilities, is a tendency for individuals and societies to reject and withdraw from reality, to create a more desirable one for themselves and instinctively seek out emotional comfort.

Under threat to life, all our resources are focused on survival. However, having survived, switching back to "normal" can be fraught with difficulty. Those who lived through war maintain a close bond with the traumatic events even after the end of hostilities, finding it difficult to begin to unpack and make sense of them.

> ***"Trying to keep it together was my main goal when the war started. I managed it, but when it stopped, I locked myself in my room and basically didn't leave the house in over two months."***
>
> Female student, Karabakh

> ***"People want to get on with their lives and think that we should forget this nightmare. They carry on like nothing happened, avoiding talk of the war. But whatever the conversation may be, it all comes back to the war."***
>
> Ex-combatant, Armenia, age 45

> ***"I need to fix the holes in the walls, fix the balcony, but I just can't make myself do it."***
>
> Male blogger, Karabakh, age 45

This is not simply apathy. Even dealing with the physical legacy of war is quite a painful process, so people put it off for later, preferring to live amid ruins and disrepair. Similarly, the societies prefer to put up with unresolved conflict, rather than set to resolving it. Social inertia works in such a way that it is preferable not to touch the painful emotional burden but instead to adopt widely accepted clichés, which in themselves are a form of societal coping mechanism, as well as being influenced by the propaganda mill. People themselves often recognise this:

> ***"One has to be open with their psychologist, but I can't open up, certainly not."***
>
> Male student, Karabakh - who smoked non-stop throughout the whole interview

For many who have gone through traumatic events, the transition from the traumatising reality to a safe one is itself a difficult process:

> ***"I don't believe that this happened to me yet, and I have doubts about which life is real – the one on the front line or the one in Yerevan right now. I can walk down the street and not notice anyone or anything – I'm still mentally on the front line."***
>
> Ex-combatant, Armenia, age 20s

Avoiding reality, which is characteristic of societal trauma, brings a sense of relief, but this is not the same as rehabilitation:

> ***"When we fled Fizuli, I decided that I would never read political news again and would keep far away from news about the conflict. That was easier for me, and I spent my life this way, busy with children and work. But for 30 years I've been waking up at night and not sleeping. I didn't know that all those years I was depressed."***
>
> Internally displaced woman, Azerbaijan, age 55

Avoidance of reality hinders our comprehension and acceptance of the world around us. It prevents people from objectively and critically evaluating the conflict context and their place in it. It also creates the conditions for the formation of subjective realities that can be in conflict with each other.

Reality avoidance is in part related to internal psychological processes which then affect one's relationship with the external context – for example, the natural desire to get rid oneself of uncomfortable emotions means we unconsciously project them onto another. In a conflict context this reinforces a one-sided view of the situation, exacerbating one's perception of being a victim, with an element of competitive victimhood. For example, statements such as "the Armenians bombed our cities – unforgivable!!" as well as emphasising one's own victimhood, also suggest that Azerbaijanis did not view their own military actions as being against peaceful civilians, but rather against occupiers.

Denial of societal trauma itself is one of the signs of trauma. Moreover, a lack of functioning psychological connection with reality creates the ideal conditions for manipulation and unpredictability, a license for 'anything goes' and loss of empathy, making it much harder to find a way out of the endless cycle of violence.

Dependency – attachment to traumatic events

Societies which have experienced tragic and traumatic events adjust to their losses by focusing on them, through a lengthy process of adaptation and acknowledgement of the new reality. In a post-war context this can be accompanied by an excessive and enduring attachment to the minute details of these events, the losses themselves, and the reasons why these losses occurred.

The interviews gave a sense of how people on all sides actively immersed themselves in the conflict and were fully absorbed by the course of events during the war. Such social cohesion is an important constituent factor both during and after a crisis, providing a feeling of safety for both the individual, the group, and for the nation as a whole.

> ***"We stood on the street wearing shirts saying, 'We will win', sang patriotic songs, collected money, and bought food and sent it to the front line – people donated generously. We had to be strong for those who were on the front line."***
>
> Female student, Yerevan

> ***"Everyone tried to help however they could. Everyone came together in this – friends, neighbours, strangers. For instance, one family sold their country house and donated the funds to the army."***
>
> Female psychologist, Azerbaijan, age 60s

Many experienced a close bond with their society through looking at photos and reading the stories of fallen soldiers. This gave them a feeling of close connection with the war and communal grief, and although they admitted themselves that it was physically and emotionally draining, they needed the feeling of connection more.

> ***"If you want to feel sad and cry for the dead, just open Facebook – it's full of horrible stories and aggression."***
>
> Armenian woman, age 34

Social cohesion and solidarity were formed through such involvement, and a conceptualisation of their knowledge and experience of the war as something unique, i.e., expressed in terms of, "If you weren't there, you'll never understand what it was like. It cannot be explained if you haven't seen and felt it." Such a belief significantly reduces openness to other people's experiences.

Interviewees said that they often talk or think about the war.

> ***"Right now about 90% of my thoughts and feelings are about the war, rather than other aspects of life. I have become a part of this massive grief."***
>
> Female student, Karabakh

> ***"Everywhere, in the yard, on TV, people are all talking about the war and the politics of it. If you get into a taxi, the driver starts to talk about it. You can't hide from the war."***
>
> Ex-combatant, Armenia, age 20s

In seeking protection mechanisms, post-war societies go through a process of reinterpreting traumatic events and losses with the objective of emotionally accepting the new reality, creating space for a new post-traumatic identity and for life to go on. This is a lengthy process both for individuals and for societies and one that demands a level of group cohesion and support. But it is also an important process, first and foremost to create a conducive environment for mourning, which then provides a basis for accepting the reality and a transition to creation and development.

Victory has brought substantial changes to Azerbaijani society. For displaced communities, one emotional attachment is replaced by another. The emotional weight of the status foisted upon them (as "people who abandoned their homes and fled"), the degradation of their human dignity, as well as attitudes of compassion and pity directed towards them, have all now been replaced by the pride of victory and the satisfaction of regaining their lands. The cult of militarism, strength and the sentiment that nothing should stand in their way is elevated in the public consciousness.

> ***"My school-age grandson goes around shaking hands with soldiers on the street – he really wants to be like them."***
>
> Elderly woman, resident of district close to the former frontline

Such intense focus and attachment to traumatic events narrows society's field of view and thinking, and all other matters and events tend to be viewed through the lens of conflict and the outcome of the war.

> ***"We wouldn't object if tomorrow's agenda suddenly included the question of Azerbaijani unification with Turkey – we would be much stronger together."***
>
> Internally displaced man, Azerbaijan, 45

A disproportionate attachment to traumatic events inflates their significance, and, as a result, a particular kind of obligation to the conflict itself emerges.

> ***"When all of Armenia is shouting that we will win, but you are on the frontline, and you see that our forces are in no way comparable to the enemy's... Tech like theirs I've only seen in the movies... It drove guys to blow themselves up..."***
>
> Ex-combatant, Armenia, 20s

Such attachment can gradually cross over into other areas of life by influencing public consciousness, habituating the societies into a dependence on the legacy of conflict.

Extremes in conceptual horizons: ‘Anything is possible’ and ‘All or nothing’

War changes people’s assessment and interpretation of the opportunities open to them – they can be either grossly exaggerated or on the contrary, minimised. Societies that have undergone a traumatic experience such as war have, on the one hand, a restricted vision of reality, wherein everything tends to be perceived through the narrow lens of danger, survival, and the search for support and a new system of security. On the other hand, this search for security can inspire creativity – numerous manoeuvres and suppositions and decisions that would not arise in the absence of the traumatic experience.

The war of 2020 sent the message to all sides of the conflict that ‘anything is possible’. It shook the foundations of a thirty-year-old belief that society had grown accustomed to.

> ***“I never thought I’d be able to come back to my village: not even to live there, but just to see it from a distance. I thought my fate would be like my father’s. His dying wish was to be buried in his native land. We took him to our area and buried him under the cover of night. Thank Allah, the Armenian snipers did not notice us, or pretended not to notice.”***
>
> Displaced man, Baku, aged 50-60

Victory creates an appetite for more victories, a desire to achieve just as much in other areas of life, both at home and abroad, which can carry the risk of disappointment. Moreover, such a mindset can be an obstacle to engaging in peacebuilding and development. For example, as some observed, it seems that Azerbaijanis settling or working in Shushi/Shusha since the war have other priorities that take precedence over building good relations with the local Armenian population.

> ***“These Azerbaijanis are not the same as the ones we lived next to. These ones kill our cows when they wander onto their territory, threaten us, shoot at us. They deprive us of water – I haven’t had running water for a month now, the Russians bring it in and I take it in buckets up to the top floor... Those people now in Shushi and around, they want to fight, not live with us.”***
>
> Female NGO representative, Karabakh, age 65

The search for strength in powerful allies can be interpreted as a search for protection. The assumption has been that with enough support, and the ability to forge a specific type of relationship with a major power, then anything is possible. Several people highlighted the Chechen leader Kadyrov as a successful model and one to emulate, in particular his ability to come to an arrangement with Moscow.

> ***“We realised that no one owes us anything, not Russia, not the USA. They are pursuing their own interests, and we should work to resolve our conflict ourselves and build our external relationships in a more pragmatic way. Then, everything can change. Our expectations of friendly support and justice have ended. We were naive to rely on that.”***
>
> Female NGO representative, Karabakh, age 58

Meanwhile, the mood in some parts of Armenian society, could be described as ‘all or nothing’, fostered by the victory some thirty years ago and the way the victory has

been used in public discourse. This black-and-white approach has hindered flexibility in public thinking about the unresolved conflict, limiting the ability to entertain any kind of political compromise. This mentality was in play in cases where, for instance, people forced to leave their homes during the 2020 war would burn them down as they fled.

When seen through this "all or nothing" lens, the outcome of the war is perceived as catastrophic:

> ***"We are left with nothing, there is nothing to build a future from."***

Reinforcement of this way of thinking fosters a public perception of the situation as "nothing", ignoring the potential possibilities.

By contrast, the Azerbaijani defeat three decades ago and the difficult conditions that those most affected, such as IDPs and border communities found themselves in enforced a type of thinking and behaviour that was more flexible, more pragmatic and ready to bargain, despite the official political will and rhetoric.

> ***"We offered options for sharing those lands; we weren't being listened to; we felt discouraged and became angry... but you see, anything is possible in this world."***
>
> Female IDP, Azerbaijan, age 58

At present, Azerbaijani society does not yet have unlimited access to the reclaimed territories, but they are amenable, content in the knowledge that they won them. The habit of simply waiting it out, learned over three decades, is still in play.

> ***"We don't know what'll happen and we aren't planning anything. It's dangerous out there, people getting blown up. The Armenians mined everywhere before retreating. We're waiting for the authorities to tell us when we can move there. But it won't be soon. We know that, and for now, we're just happy that we won our lands back from the Armenians."***
>
> Male IDP, Baku, age 45

However, there is a risk that Azerbaijani society might also begin to acquire an 'all or nothing' attitude towards the conflict and go down the same route as Armenian society after the first war, which could pose a serious risk for conflict escalation and obstacles for peaceful coexistence.

Furthermore, since Azerbaijani official and social media channels have broadcast images from these territories, having had no access to them for so long, Azerbaijani society is now seeing the scale of destruction as though for the first time. This has been a trigger for society, returning people to the emotional reality of that time, which still needs to be worked through due to the absence of conditions to mourn these losses in the past.

As Azerbaijani society adapts to victory and to seeing it through to its conclusion, and Armenian society is in search of new foundation and system of security, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the moment and use it to manage a shift away from militaristic moods and an expanding range of conflict scenarios towards an end of violence, rebuilding and development.

Unpredictability as a factor in instability

> ***"You can't plan your life, your family's life, and you can't see the future of your people – I don't know where we're going..."***
>
> Female Karabakh Armenian journalist, age 27

The unpredictability of the situation is reflected in all aspects of people's lives. Everyone talked about unpredictability, but in particular people living in Karabakh, the former border regions and displaced people mentioned that they feel heightened anxiety every day.

> ***"I don't put my clothes away in the wardrobe. We don't need it. I wash and dry everything, then put it straight into large black plastic bags, so that at any moment, if and when we come under intense fire, we are ready to go. We've lived like this for many years now."***
>
> Female teacher from a border region in Azerbaijan, age 55-60

> ***"I'm scared of going to the toilet at night – there's a window there and I'm afraid that Turkish special ops fighters might climb through it. I have a fear of violence. I don't feel safe anywhere in Karabakh. And I'm not the only one – many people move to Armenia for this feeling, then come back."***
>
> Female journalist, Karabakh, age 32

Many attribute the source of unpredictability to the unresolved conflict and general geopolitical situation, i.e., "the great powers playing their games on our field." Some also described it as something "coming from within people, all of us."

> ***"We lost not just land, or people, but ourselves... It's this sense of being lost."***
>
> Female student, Karabakh

The older generation of Karabakh residents might find it less painful to adapt to the new Azerbaijani reality than the younger generation. To them, it is a return to the past, whereas for young people it is a worrying unknown.

> ***"My world has come crashing down around me... I have never lived in Azerbaijan and I'm scared. I'm waiting for the worst to happen. They're burning our wheat fields, not allowing us to harvest – there could be a famine this winter."***
>
> Female journalist, Karabakh, age 27

Unpredictability and uncertainty are being signalled not only by the warring sides, according to the interviewees, but also by the actions of peacekeepers:

> ***"There's 6 or 7 Russian checkpoints between Yerevan and Stepanakert. We're constantly being interrogated: the other day I was on a minibus with a couple and the wife was sent back – she didn't have official registration in Stepanakert. Soon none of us will be allowed back into our homes."***
>
> Male NGO representative, Karabakh, age 60

> ***"Armenians who were born and raised in Karabakh but now live in Ukraine were not allowed to see their parents."***
>
> Female NGO representative, Karabakh age 65

The overall backdrop of conflict in the region means that people interpret unpredictability as instability, rather than being able to embrace the unknown as a foundation for building a peaceful future.

Continuation of violence as a search for safety and justice

The end of hostilities in November 2020 left the conflict open, with no one fully satisfied with the outcome. People interpret the post-war period as a temporary break to prepare for a "final and conclusive" war, in which "everything will be decided":

> ***"I don't like violence, but right now I have no choice. If we don't scare them off, then they get cocky, and advance closer and closer."***
>
> Male student, Karabakh

> ***"They have paused for a while to lick their wounds and then attack us again. We have to be prepared. For example, we need to train groups of psychologists to provide emergency support during the next war."***
>
> Female psychologist, Azerbaijan, 60

Militaristic and nationalist propaganda maintains the societies in a state of war even in the absence of open hostilities. Violence has reached a new level, taking on qualities that were present during the 44-day war, and becoming an inseparable part of the post-war reality.

> ***"Before, the Azerbaijanis were far away, and it was all a bit abstract. Now they are so close, it's frightening. We have to do something about it. There will be regular skirmishes, that's for sure."***
>
> Male Blogger, Karabakh, age 28

Everyday violence is seen as part of a long-term strategy to achieve certain goals:

> ***"They're shooting from Shushi, throwing stones at us, to scare us and make us eventually move out."***
>
> Housewife, Karabakh, age 48

> ***"Everyone must live on their own land and then there'll be peace. The Armenians came here only 150 years ago, and they must understand that we are not about to hand over our lands. We will fight for them day in, day out."***
>
> Female teacher, Azerbaijan, age 57

Believing one's own truth justifies the use of violence, the continuation of fighting and appropriating the war for oneself.

> ***"If it makes the Armenians feel better to think that the Syrians fought for us etc., then let them think that, but it was us fighting. This is our war."***
>
> Male NGO representative, Baku, age 42

> ***"The Russian peacekeepers say they don't want to be here. It's not their war. And I know that it's our war – we should be fighting, not them."***
>
> Male student, Karabakh

The trauma of the first war, life in the context of protracted conflict with regular escalations, and now the 44-day war with all its consequences – all together have created the conditions for instrumentalisation of violence by the societies, for perceiving it as "normal", and destroyed the efforts of peacebuilding.

> ***"I attended seminars and other events run by international organisations. I thought that humanism was the foundation of everything. But now I don't think that anymore."***
>
> Female, Karabakh, age 24

A long and painstaking journey of psycho-social rehabilitation will be needed to change this approach and develop peaceful methods of problem-solving both in everyday life and in building the future.

Utilisation of the conflict

It is not only the present and future that are subject to reappraisal as individuals and societies process traumatic events and their aftermath. The past also comes under review, with everything re-examined through the lens of traumatic experience.

This tendency facilitates the utilisation or manipulation of the conflict and war experience both within the communities and externally.

Karabakh Armenian society's re-interpretation of its past experiences has been a fairly painful process, and one can hear different opinions on how this war could have been avoided. Statements illustrating this include:

> ***"Why didn't we join Armenia after the first war? It's clear that someone needed those presidential and ministerial titles and money laundering schemes."***

or

> ***"We should have made a deal with the Azerbaijanis instead of waiting for someone else to resolve our conflict."***

Young people in Karabakh and Armenia feel that the older generation, those in power, have a lot to answer for.

> ***"We lived meagrely and we knew it. We went along with it for the sake of a strong defence."***
>
> Female student from Karabakh, Yerevan

> ***"In Karabakh the post-war generation experienced terrible deprivation growing up – everything was poured into defence. We didn't have a childhood. In thirty years not one of my friends has been to a circus. Our first circus was expected only in 2021..."***
>
> Male blogger, Karabakh, age 48

While Azerbaijani public discourse since the 2020 war has revolved around power and unity with Turkey, Armenian discourse has mostly revolved around betrayal, both internal and external, and the faltering of sacred ties between Armenia and Karabakh, all framed in an emotional vein.

Public polemics in Azerbaijan demonstrate the way victory is used to transform the societal complex of the defeated into that of the victor. Victory has given young people who fought a major social boost, especially for those from social classes who have few, if any opportunities during peace time. This reinforces the value of conflict in the public consciousness: the cult of military might and the halo of victory become the highest of goals, against which other aspects of life seem unimportant.

> ***"Petrol went up, groceries went up, people are complaining. I tell them – you want both victory and cheap petrol? It doesn't work like that."***
>
> Woman, Baku, age 55

It is worth noting that methods used to utilise the conflict are the same on all sides, built upon the premise that the societies agree of their own free will to disregard their own needs for the sake of success of their side in the conflict.

Through this process of re-interpreting the past, even if many were not yet born or were only young children at the time, Azerbaijani society arrives at a certain conclusion:

> ***"There was no point dragging out those peacebuilding initiatives... What good is this Western democracy to us anyway? All they did these 30-odd years was pretend that they're doing something to resolve the conflict, until we took matters into our own hands, united with a brotherly nation and did what we should have done long ago..."***

This attitude not only calls into question the raison d'être of peacebuilding and any possibility of conflict transformation, but both widens and narrows the public perception of their circle of support and solidarity.

> ***"Look, everyone has ditched the Armenians, even Russia and the USA, while we have support from everywhere, all the way to Pakistan, and Turkey is basically with us."***
>
> Displaced man, Azerbaijan, age 56

> ***"We don't trust anyone, not Russia, nor the West – it's not like we have oil to garner their friendship."***
>
> Female NGO representative, Yerevan, age 35

This contributes to the revision or re-assessment of the military experience and outcome of the war, often appropriated and used for internal purposes:

> ***"All those who sat in Shushi during the war taking selfies are now heroes, influencing public opinion. They are the most active on TV and social media. To hear them talk about it, you'd think they had just returned having taken Baku."***
>
> Armenian ex-combatant, age 23

Representatives of all the societies talked about how bringing up old traumatic events, such as the Armenian genocide during the Ottoman Empire or the tragic events at Khojaly, was used in the context of conflict as a mobilising factor:

> ***"It gave us an internal justification for the necessity of military action and particular cruelty..."***
>
> Ex-combatant, Karabakh, age 25

Paradoxically, the price paid in lives lost to the conflict is a motivator for the societies to carry on with the war, despite the fact that violence will only take away more lives:

> ***"...To ensure the blood of our ancestors and friends was not spilled for nothing – our nation cannot remain as it is today."***
>
> Male student, Karabakh, age 19

> ***"To the world, this conflict is over, but to us it is still on-going and will continue – we lost too much to forgive."***
>
> Ex-combatant, Karabakh age 38

The societies have a general understanding that the conflict is being used by outside stakeholders which is articulated, for example:

> ***"If you listen to their rhetoric it sounds like, to avoid being slaughtered by the Turks, we need to open Russian schools in Karabakh... This is appropriation of Karabakh, but we're expected to be grateful to Russia."***
>
> Female student, Karabakh

> ***"Turkey doesn't need Karabakh – it needs to push Russia out of the region."***
>
> Displaced man, Baku, age 58

Armenians and Azerbaijanis were almost unanimous in their assessment of the presence of Russian peacekeepers, for example expressed as, “Russia using the conflict entirely in its own interest”; or “Once Russia arrives, it never leaves”; and “The Russians have arrived, and we’re going there to live.”

However, according to the Karabakh Armenian interviewees, most people there are happy with the presence of Russian peacekeepers, which they feel gives them physical and even economic security, through access to a Russian pension. Many also feel reassured by the peacekeepers’ presence, thinking that “Maybe we can get back some territories if we’re friends with them.”

Societal regulators of trauma

Despite this understanding of third parties’ utilisation of the conflict there is less critical appraisal or understanding of how people themselves and their own societies utilise the conflict, or how they are subject to manipulation.

Traumatic events change the entire social fabric. The entire configuration of an individual’s social interactions, roles and expectations is subject to re-examination and change. Society activates its coping mechanisms and adapts to the conflict to ensure continued functioning. In the process of forming new role expectations, every individual and every group understands how to live up to the expectations of the societies in conflict to which they belong. In this case, what you expect from yourself, those around you and society and the nation at large changes.

In this way, societies tend to have their own regulatory mechanisms for manifestations of trauma, intended to ensure a correlation between behavioural norms for individuals and norms for society as a whole. Regulation happens through various means, including, for example, calls to responsibility and emotional control. Unwritten behavioural rules for different people and expectations of their social and gendered role also serve to regulate one’s response to trauma. For example, there is an assumption that veterans should remain strong-willed and not show signs of weakness. This is equally the case on both the winning and losing sides. However, the image of victory must be glamorous, leaving no room for the image of the injured, the shell-shocked and the suffering. The victor should be happy, proud and ready for the next victory.

Such societal regulators of people that have survived a traumatic experience are directed towards creating and reinforcing a new post-trauma identity. Yet in societies with authoritarian values, instead of working to facilitate rehabilitation, they can instead facilitate the use of trauma as a tool in controlling and regulating the conflict potential, maintaining the people’s readiness to support a military escalation.

The creation and maintenance of such expectations for outward behaviour gradually becomes a stable social directive, and non-conformance can result in difficult internal contradictions, crises, and even tragic outcomes.

> ***"Our boys, our victors need psychological help. They are in a critical condition: we regularly hear of suicides and it's frightening."***
>
> Female psychologist Azerbaijan, age 58

> ***"Society is in shock: it doesn't understand what's happening when a veteran who comes back from the war a victor, rather than being happy and proud, loses control after a few months and screams at his family, 'Get out of the house, I'm going to destroy it,' and does that."***
>
> Male psychologist, Azerbaijan, age 33

Something similar happened in Armenian society after the first war, too, but insufficient attention was paid to these manifestations of trauma or the need to work with it.

> ***"What rehabilitation? We were the victors! All this stayed around, like a powder keg, and today we have a mesh of interwoven traumas that really are in our way."***
>
> Female psychologist, Armenia, age 40

Behaviour modifiers work on the level of an individual's values and acquired experience. For example, one Azerbaijani woman shared that she was embarrassed to hug her son out of solidarity for mothers who lost children.

At this point it is society that starts to define the criteria for what is and is not acceptable behaviour:

> ***"Now when someone gets married, they're judged for it – you can't, apparently, out of respect for the memory of the fallen."***
>
> Housewife, Armenia

A lack of understanding of societal trauma, and how to work with it, alongside the imprint of war on public consciousness and life under the constant threat of renewed military action since the 1990s, and regular escalations, all together have changed people's worldview, the value they assign to human life and the price they have to pay for the conflict.

In Armenian, Azerbaijani and Karabakh Armenian societies alike people observed that war victims are not treated humanely and honourably, nor are people who acquired disabilities in the wake of both wars. At the same time, according to the interviewees, this has not significantly diminished the desire to fight. Dissatisfaction with internal political life and the general state of things within the three societies has not indented the appetite for, or willingness to support war. In the context of conflict, this system of obligations, aimed at social, gender, ethnic and other groups as well as each individual, creates an unwritten social contract with no room for discussion of its terms and conditions.

The process by which societal expectations become obligations for certain groups draws in everyone into supporting a system of violence, even if this is not what the individual

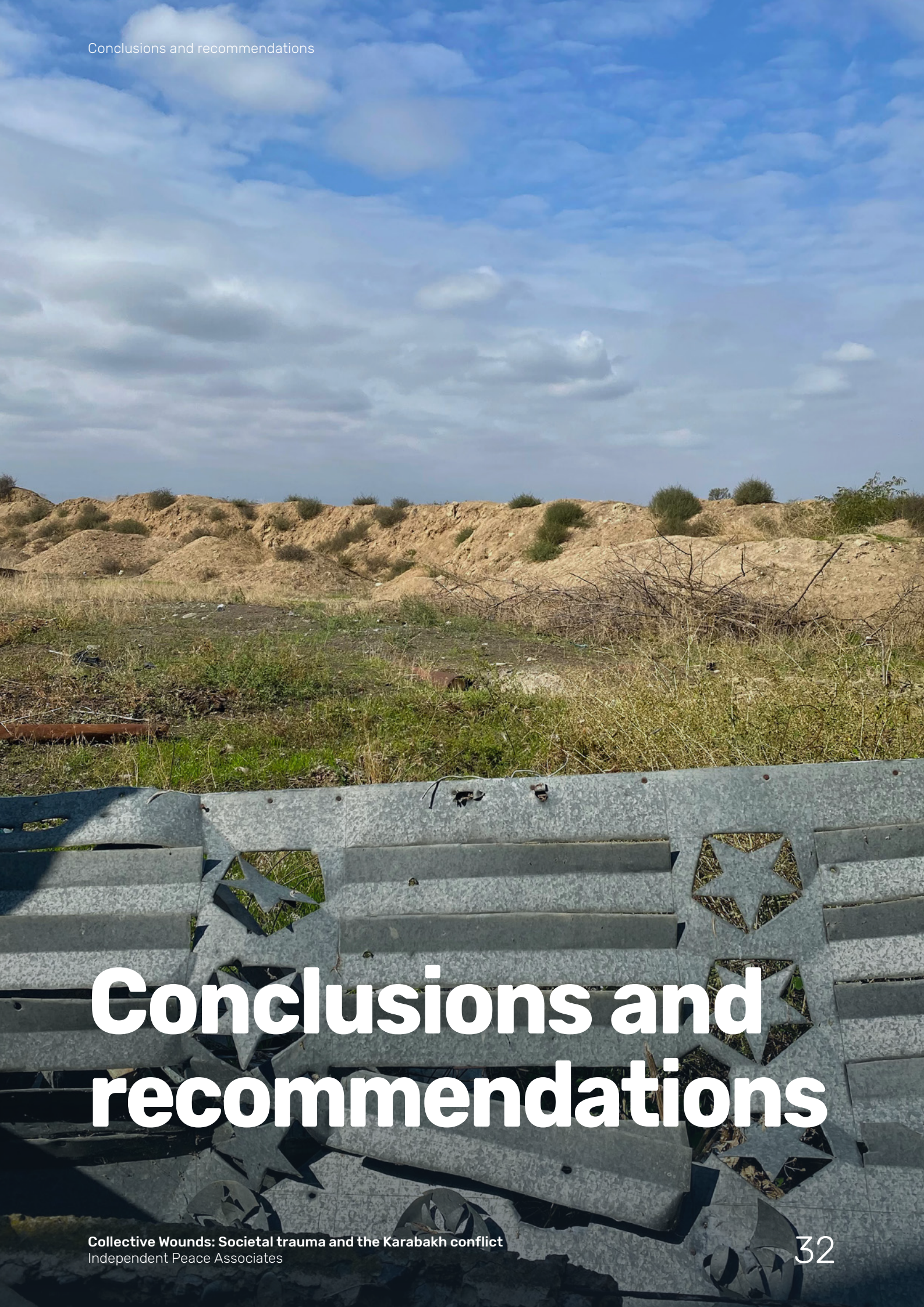
or group want. Meanwhile, the role of the active and combative actor in the conflict is often presented as the will and desire of every person and the nation as a whole.

> ***"I don't voice my thoughts about the peaceful coexistence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis because I'm worried that our society is not ready for this and people will attack me... Nowadays, even messages like that from the government are received critically. Everyone expects the government to 'fight to the bitter end'."***
>
> Karabakh Azerbaijani woman, Baku, age 45-50

At the same time, the expectations that Karabakh Armenian and Armenian societies have of their authorities are fairly minimal, which gives rise to different group expectations.

It is at this very moment in time, when the societies are seeking out and reconstituting new mechanisms for protection, and seeking a post war identity, that both political manipulation and societal expectations exert their influence on each other, become entwined and difficult to disentangle, and ultimately difficult to determine which is the stronger force.

Reinforcement of societal expectations of individuals and of groups and the formation of behavioural norms that clash with people's real psychological state can serve to preserve tensions in a society and create the conditions that make a conflict re-escalation more likely. The conflict is essentially becoming a mechanism that functions through societal regulators, and one that is increasingly self-regulated by the societies themselves, maintaining through social control just the level of tension necessary to keep the conflict going.



Conclusions and recommendations

In this paper, I have attempted to show how trauma manifests itself in the societies in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war, to understand how trauma influences societal, political and conflict dynamics, and how working with societal trauma can reopen opportunities for peacebuilding – something which has currently lost any attraction it might have had for the conflicting parties, whose search for peace is based exclusively on their own perceptions of peace and security, and on satisfying their society's needs alone.

I present trauma as a perfectly natural response to dramatic and tragic circumstances, the primary characteristic of which is the destruction of the societal construct that makes us feel safe. This relates not only to physical safety, but also to the social and political and cultural systems that we belong in and through which we make sense of the world. Our priority then becomes restoring a sense of security, a process which can take quite different forms, not always constructive or conducive to peace.

I explored some elements of individual and collective trauma evident in the context and highlighted its long-term and intergenerational dimensions. We see that societal and gendered expectations shape how individuals deal with trauma, often encouraged to suppress it, and how people tend to be able to identify trauma in others but play down their own. Trauma is evident among both the victorious and the vanquished.

A lack of understanding of the origins and influence of trauma, and taboos around trauma inhibit possibilities to work with it both on a societal level and for individuals. Unworked through emotions combined with societal expectations, lack of certainty about the future, propaganda and narratives combine to create feelings of victimisation, along with an array of related emotions. However, sooner or later such feelings morph into aggression, through the desire for justice and security, the pursuit of which is then justified through violent means, contributing to endless cycles of conflict.

However, this analysis can only be the tip of the iceberg. Societal trauma is incredibly complex, multi-faceted and evolves over time – not always in a linear fashion or uniform across different segments of society and thus may emerge in quite unpredictable ways. In attempting to describe it we are at risk of making simplified generalisations, and there is still much to unpack and understand. Each of the phenomena outlined in this study could be further explored in depth, ideally engaging the societies in collective reflection and analysis.

By studying how trauma manifests itself in the conflict context and influences its long-term prospects, we intend to bring a new psycho-sociological dimension to conflict analysis, broadening it out to enable emotions or 'the human factor' to be taken into account. Comprehending the condition of societies in conflict, the way they perceive their reality and look towards the future, is no less important predictor of future events than political, geo-political or economic analysis. Indeed, an analysis that highlights the intersection between psychological, social and political can provide new insight and help identify ways forward for peaceful conflict resolution.

The recommendations below are not exhaustive and should be approached with a high level of sensitivity. Working with trauma is a delicate and sensitive process, requires a gradual but sustained approach and should be accompanied by qualified and experienced professionals. There are no fixed blueprints that can be easily applied, and for all these reasons methods and approaches are difficult to quickly replicate. A 'do no harm' approach is required to avoid inadvertent deepening of trauma or further stigmatisation, which could lead to resistance thus undermining such work. In this respect, a first step could be to invest in building a community of practice, a multi-disciplinary regional network of psychologists, conflict transformation practitioners and political scientists who can develop approaches together and offer each other supervision and mutual support.

The recommendations are oriented towards two overarching objectives:

First, there needs to be a recognition of the phenomenon of societal trauma, the significant influence it has on people's lives, on societies affected by conflict, and the need to work with it through a trauma-informed approach.

Secondly, it is essential to find an alternative, a new system of societal security based not on confrontation but on dialogue and cooperation, as a means to ensure the search for security.

The process of working with trauma in order to increase the chances of finding ways for peaceful coexistence should be open and appealing to all layers of society, in particular women. Women took on the burden of dealing with the consequences of the first Karabakh war in the 1990s, yet remained in the shadows politically. It is the same after the 2020 war, again it is women who fulfilling a critical role in ensuring the functioning of society, while men remain the political masters. Rebuilding for the future requires rebuilding society as a whole, and not just infrastructure or politics. Women, due to their social and gendered roles, tend to be more connected within society, rooted in daily realities and as such hold valuable knowledge and social skills that could result in more effective policy making if it was more utilised. Also, engaging people who are directly affected by the conflict will bring positive benefits both to the process, but also for their rehabilitation. A multi-layered, intersectional, whole-society approach is required.

Public level – Raising awareness and understanding of societal/ collective trauma

There is a need for a competent and professional facilitation of public discussion and analysis of trauma, to raise public awareness of how trauma impacts us both on an individual level, on society more broadly, on the internal political context, social problems and conflict dynamics. Such a process could focus on the following:

- Building awareness and acknowledgement that all those engaged in a conflict context are part of the collective trauma, through an understanding of how our individual and societal coping mechanisms work.
- Conducting public education on the features of societal trauma – how these phenomena arise, how they manifest in society and how they influence narratives and mental models.
- Raising critical thinking of society through public analysis of the cyclical nature of trauma – in particular how and why the societies can switch from a state of 'victim' into the position of 'aggressor' and vice versa, facilitating an endless cycle of conflict and possibilities for external stakeholders to use it to their advantage.
- Public reflection and self-reflection through analysis of those societal tendencies which appear paradoxical. For example, the process of forging public consensus on the need for military force as a way of relieving tension between conflicting parties, and resolving the conflict.
- Public discussion on the benefits of war, how war is instrumentalised and even convenient in some circles, as a way for many to enhance their social status or free themselves of complexes - and thus how these benefits of war contribute to the risk of regular escalation.
- Public analysis and discussion of the role of societal expectations and norms, and how they influence our personal choices, behaviour and on taking a position in a conflict context.
- Analysing the past through an understanding of trauma to learn lessons and identify how to mitigate the influence of trauma in the present and in the future.
- Finally, it is important to enable a de-stigmatisation of mental health and mental health disorders, so that people are able to talk openly about what they feel and think. This will gradually shift the public discourse away from a focus on the war and towards a conversation about people, and towards a new post-war identity in which the conflict will not be as central as currently. Acknowledging that trauma is a natural phenomenon, and that even those not usually perceived as 'directly affected' can still experience trauma can help to address the taboo of seeking psychological support. The analysis finds that people often suppress their own trauma to live up to societal expectations to be strong at such a critical moment during or after conflict.

All of the above should be accompanied by sensitive, cross-disciplinary work between conflict practitioners and trauma specialists to increase trauma-literacy of media, civil society, and the education system. Increasing public literacy and understanding of why we behave and think the way we do, as individuals, as members of intersecting social or identity groups is fundamental to understanding societal trauma as a psycho-socio-political phenomenon.

Working with specific target groups and individuals

- Given the limited number of psychologists trained to work with individual trauma, it would be advisable to provide training to increase mental health and trauma literacy of other professions who regularly engage in the public, such as teachers, social workers, doctors, etc. so that they can be trauma-informed in their work. At the same time, it is worth integrating the theory and study of societal trauma into formal education and training of social workers, psychologists, etc.
- Facilitating the development of safe spaces of mutual support for groups which share a close emotional connection, and which offer members a feeling of belonging, identify new sources of strength and protection, and help society develop a vision for the future. Well facilitated groups can channel the vulnerable individual's need for group protection into a search for development and personal growth, while offering the group a platform for mourning, re-working of collective memory, finding a new identity, one's place in the new reality and ways forward.
- Facilitating dialogue on different levels between different groups and generations is important. Now both older and younger generations have experience of war, but absolutely different experiences of peace and cooperation - and thus could have quite different attitudes towards the future, and towards building peace.
- Working with the past, rehabilitation of the past through acknowledgement of all mistakes can have a direct influence on understanding of the present and broaden the horizon for conflict transformation in the future. For example, working with collective memory through research, films, collating archives, opening space for dealing with traumatic history.
- Encouraging and supporting individuals to get actively engaged in community activities, and in post war reconstruction and rehabilitation will help with their own rehabilitation, help them find their place in the post-war context, gain a feeling of control over their lives and their society. Involving people in planning, decision making on a daily practical level will help to channel their desire for a fairer, more just society, and find their place in building it, so that in time, they themselves will begin to articulate the need for peacebuilding processes for the sake of stability in their own lives and that of their society.

Concluding remarks

Each of the above recommendations need to be further elaborated collaboratively by cross-disciplinary teams of psychologists, conflict transformation practitioners and civil activists in each context, engaging also with the media, and adapted to each specific context. The work should take place initially within the societies, and only then widen the format. Such a process can raise awareness of society, stimulate an internal discussion on how societal trauma influences the societies and the whole conflict context. The theme of societal trauma has great potential and need for joint endeavour. It could serve as a point of mutual interest for dialogue, the exchange of information and experience, thus deepening analysis of some of the phenomena described in this paper. Such a process can facilitate the development of critical thinking, an understanding of the place of the individual in the wider conflict context, and of the roots and cyclical nature of aggression and why people feel the need to seek out a 'saviour'. It can bring the sides closer to an understanding of social dynamics, the similarity of their problems, which will open up in the future opportunities for effective peacebuilding based on qualitative changes in the social fabric and new mental models.

In the meantime, I would like to thank those whom I interviewed for their trust in me and the process. Without their openness and readiness to talk about all these delicate themes, it would have not been possible to summarise the tendencies outlined in this paper. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends for their support and for their critical eye.

Collective Wounds: Societal trauma and the Karabakh conflict
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