



Paul van Zyl

Global Leader and Advisor on Transitional Justice and Human Rights

TOPIC: Social Change

SUBTOPICS: Ethics and Culture; International Relations; Global Policy and Economics

BIG IDEAS:

What is Transitional Justice?

Transitional justice refers to a range of approaches that societies undertake to reckon with legacies of widespread or systematic human rights abuse as they move from a period of violent conflict or oppression towards peace, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for individual and collective rights.

In making such a transition, societies must confront the painful legacy, or burden, of the past in order to achieve a holistic sense of justice for all citizens, to establish or renew civic trust, to reconcile people and communities, and to prevent future abuses. A variety of approaches to transitional justice are available that can help wounded societies start anew.

These approaches are both judicial and non-judicial, and they seek to encompass broadly the various dimensions of justice that can heal wounds and contribute to social reconstruction. Transitional justice incorporates a realistic view of the challenges faced by societies emerging from conflict or repression, and an appreciation of their unique cultural and historical contexts, without allowing these realities to serve as excuses for inaction.

The approaches to transitional justice are based on a fundamental belief in universal human rights, and rely on international human rights and humanitarian law in demanding that states halt, investigate, punish, repair, and prevent abuses.

BIOGRAPHY

Paul van Zyl is a co-founder and the executive vice-president of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), an organization which assists countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse. The ICTJ was founded in 2001 in response to a growing recognition that facing legacies of past abuse and injustice is crucial to promoting human rights around the world. By helping to address past crimes, transitional justice can help to break vicious cycles of violence and reduce the likelihood of future conflict.

Mr. van Zyl has acted as an adviser and consultant to human rights organizations, governments, international organizations, and foundations on transitional justice issues in numerous countries. From 1995 to 1998, he served as Executive Secretary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, helping to establish the Commission, develop its structure and modus operandi and manage its operations. He has also worked as a researcher for the Goldstone Commission, as a department head at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg, and as an associate at Davis Polk and Wardwell in New York.

Throughout his career, Mr. van Zyl has received a number of academic and professional honors. He has been selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum, joining a group of extraordinary leaders under 40 who dedicate their time and energy to working towards a better global future. He was also selected as a TED Fellow, and was named as one of New York's "Top 15 Lawyers Under 40" by *New York Lawyer Magazine*.

Mr. van Zyl also currently serves as director of New York University School of Law's Transitional Justice Program, and teaches law both in New York and Singapore. He obtained a BA and an LLB from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and an LLM in International Law from the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. Following these studies, he was accepted into the prestigious Hauser Global Scholars Program at New York University School of Law, where he completed a LLM in Corporate Law.