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**Echoes of Silence: Unravelling Enforced Disappearances and the Quest for  
Reconciliation in Sri Lanka's JVP Insurgencies (1971 & 1987–1989)**

**Summary:**

- Enforced disappearances during Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurgencies (1971; 1987–1989) continue to shape the lives of affected families decades later.
- The absence of truth regarding the fate of the disappeared produces ambiguous loss, generating intergenerational trauma that extends beyond direct victims.
- These impacts undermine trust in state institutions, limit civic participation, and weaken reconciliation and inclusive development outcomes.
- Addressing the legacy of enforced disappearances requires trauma-informed, family-centred, and intergenerational approaches embedded within development and reconciliation frameworks.

**What is the development issue?**

**Context and scale**

Enforced disappearances represent a persistent development challenge in post-conflict Sri Lanka. While national and international attention has focused primarily on disappearances linked to the civil war (1983–2009), families affected by disappearances during the JVP insurgencies remain marginalised within transitional justice and development processes.

For these families, the continued absence of information about the fate of their loved ones produces conditions of unresolved grief, social stigma, and long-term insecurity. This uncertainty not only affects individual wellbeing but also shapes family dynamics, community relationships, and patterns of engagement with state institutions. The development implications of enforced disappearance therefore extend beyond human rights violations, influencing social cohesion, trust, and participation across generations.

*Figure 1. Physical access constraints in rural research settings*



**Why this matters for development**

Unresolved enforced disappearances have long-term development implications. They contribute to:

- Persistent psychosocial distress across generations
- Weakened community cohesion in historically marginalised regions
- Low public trust in state institutions and governance mechanisms
- Disproportionate social and economic burdens on women and elderly caregivers

These impacts undermine reconciliation efforts and erode the social foundations necessary for inclusive development and durable peace

## Key findings

Research focus: This research draws on in-depth qualitative engagement to examine how second- and third-generation family members experience and interpret the legacy of enforced disappearance, and how these experiences shape community relations, trust, and engagement with institutions.

### 1. Memory and loss are collectively experienced

Family narratives of disappearance are produced and sustained collectively rather than individually. Intergenerational storytelling—often occurring in family gatherings—plays a central role in transmitting memory, shaping identity, and sustaining informal forms of remembrance. This collective memory practice reflects patterns of post-memory, where later generations inherit the emotional and psychological weight of past violence.



### 2. Intergenerational trauma shapes everyday social life

The absence of information about the disappeared creates conditions of ambiguous loss. Across generations, this manifests in silence around certain events, heightened caution in public expression, and long-term emotional distress. These patterns influence social participation, political engagement, and perceptions of safety.

*“We gave our statement many times, but nothing changed. After a while, people stopped believing it mattered.”*

(Second-generation family member, Southern Province)

This disengagement reflects not apathy, but accumulated experiences of institutional inaction.

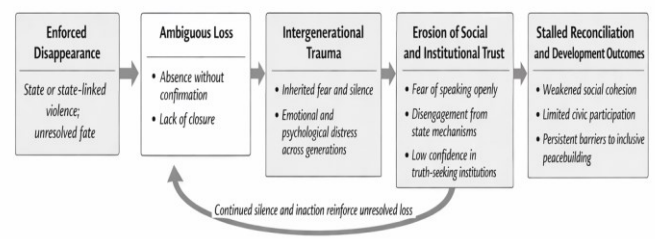
### 3. Families engage in informal memory preservation

In the absence of formal recognition, families maintain memory through private and culturally embedded practices, including safeguarding personal objects, recounting stories within trusted spaces, and visiting sites associated with disappearance. These practices function as informal forms of memory activism and challenge ongoing denial.

### 4. Institutional responses are perceived as distant and ineffective

Many families expressed limited trust in formal transitional justice mechanisms, including the Office on Missing Persons. Concerns included prolonged delays, fear of surveillance, and the emotional cost of repeated testimony without visible outcomes. These perceptions reduce participation and limit the effectiveness of existing mechanisms.

Figure 2. Conceptual pathways of intergenerational impact following enforced disappearance



This diagram illustrates how unresolved enforced disappearance generates ambiguous loss, which in turn produces intergenerational trauma, weakens trust in institutions, and constrains reconciliation and inclusive development outcomes.

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## Implications

### For MFAT and Aotearoa New Zealand

- Support community-led memory and dialogue initiatives that align with local cultural practices of collective remembrance.
- Invest in long-term, trauma-informed psychosocial programmes for families affected by ambiguous loss.
- Partner with trusted local organisations to create safe spaces for intergenerational engagement and oral history documentation.

### For the Government of Sri Lanka

- Integrate victims of JVP-era disappearances into national reconciliation and truth-seeking frameworks alongside other conflict-affected groups.
- Strengthen the independence, transparency, and witness-protection capacities of institutions such as the Office on Missing Persons.
- Implement symbolic and archival measures, including public acknowledgment and memorial initiatives, to restore dignity to affected families.

### For civil society and NGOs

- Prioritise the documentation of oral histories before first-generation witnesses are lost.
- Deliver psychosocial support that recognises culturally specific expressions of grief, silence, and embodied memory.
- Facilitate networks among descendant groups whose experiences have remained politically marginalised.

### Consequences of action vs inaction

- Meaningful engagement with the legacy of enforced disappearances can strengthen institutional trust, promote social healing, and contribute to long-term peacebuilding. Continued inaction risks deepening

intergenerational trauma, reinforcing social exclusion, and entrenching historical erasure.

## Limitations and further research

### Limitations

- This study relied primarily on spoken and material forms of memory due to ethical constraints around visual documentation. Collective storytelling limited generational attribution of specific narratives, and participation by first-generation relatives was constrained by age and health. Further research is needed on third-generation wellbeing, gendered experiences of loss, and comparative regional patterns of post-conflict memory and reconciliation.

### Further research

- Further research is needed to explore comparative experiences across regions and to examine how development interventions can integrate trauma-informed and family-centred approaches more effectively.

## References

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## Appendices

### During the field visit in Southern Province



In a village with my amazing two research assistants.



During a family participant discussion. Face covered due to the ethics.



### Me here and there during the data collection



People who helped me to find families of disappeared

