

New practice note prioritises survivors in the fight for justice

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In May 2025, the International Accountability Platform for Belarus (IAPB) published a practice note called '*A Survivor-Centred Approach to Documentation for Criminal Accountability*'. Building on years of documentation of human rights violations, the publication offers a detailed and valuable guide for civil society actors seeking to document human rights violations while also prioritising survivors' needs, agency, and safety at the centre.

The note is issued within the context of an increasing emphasis on survivor-centred approaches to justice, especially in contexts where state institutions are either unwilling or unable to investigate and prosecute torture (IAPB, 2025: 33). This focus emerges against the background of a long history of survivor-led organisations that have documented torture. Developed through consultations with survivors, NGOs, and international bodies, the guide outlines a documentation process informed by principles such as the 'do no harm' principle and incorporates initiatives like informed consent protocols (IAPB, 2025: 5-6).

At its core, this approach recognises survivors not just as passive victims or witnesses, but as active rights-holders whose dignity and self-determination must guide every step of the documentation process (IAPB, 2025: 6). This is especially crucial in settings where survivors may risk reprisal and retraumatisation.

Beyond Belarus

The IAPB was established in March 2021 in response to the violations of fundamental rights committed following Belarus's disputed presidential election in August 2020 (IAPB, 2025: 4). It is a coalition of NGO's working to document evidence of human rights violations, including torture, committed in the context of those events.

It draws on consultations with leading global accountability actors from various countries, including the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), Freedom from Torture, the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture

Victims (IRCT), and numerous other organisations (IAPB, 2025: 5-6).

The result is a flexible guide applicable to a broad audience engaged in the documentation process of torture and ill-treatment. In particular, the note addresses documentation in spaces where state accountability mechanisms are compromised or where survivor participation in justice processes is rare.

From passive subjects to active rights-holders

At the heart of the practice note is an emphasis on recognising survivors not merely as sources of evidence or passive victims, but as rights-holders with agency and interests that inform the documentation process (IAPB, 2025: 6).

Given this diversity of experiences and perspectives, this practice note cautions against one-size-fits-all approaches and instead offers a set of key principles that can be adapted across contexts (IAPB, 2025: 33). These principles fall under three main headings: relationships with survivors, representation, and accompaniment (IAPB, 2025: 6-7).

Under *relationships with survivors*, the guide emphasises the need to respond to survivors' own priorities and preferences in the documentation process. It reinforces the principle of 'do no harm', requiring organisations to conduct risk assessments and take steps to prevent re-traumatisation and other harm. A survivor-led process is only feasible if it does not expose communities and human rights defenders to further security risks. Non-discrimination is also central, as survivors must be treated fairly, regardless of identity, and their self-expression must be respected. All engagement should be marked by dignity and compassion, with staff showing patience and empathy, especially during difficult interviews.

The *representation* principles focus on managing expectations, ensuring informed consent, and establishing mechanisms for accountability and transparency. Documenters must be clear about what they can and cannot deliver and provide accurate information about potential outcomes. Survivors must give informed consent regarding the use of their data and be informed about what happens when their information is shared with other entities. Feedback mechanisms should be in place to allow survivors to raise concerns and help organisations improve their practices.

Finally, under *accompaniment*, the guide calls for holistic support, including referrals to trusted services where needed. Participation must always be voluntary and informed, with attention to power dynamics. Organisations are also urged to plan ahead, ensuring data is handled responsibly and that survivors have a point of contact even after a project ends.

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Together, these principles reflect a commitment to centring survivors not only in documentation practices but in the broader pursuit of justice, ensuring that their rights, security, and voices remain at the heart of accountability efforts (IAPB, 2025: 6-7).

Phases of survivor-centred documentation

The guide covers four phases of survivor-centred documentation, which are shown in table 1 (IAPB, 2025: 5).

Table 1. *Four phases of survivor-centred documentation*

Phase	Key activities	Survivor-centred practices
Reaching victims and survivors	Initial contact	Survivor-informed approach
Identifying and responding to survivors' needs	Accompaniment, needs assessment	Holistic assessment of needs, referral to medical/legal/psychosocial services
Shaping the methodology of documentation around survivors	Consent, security, safe data collection	Safe interview spaces, informed consent, intersectional approaches
Protection against secondary trauma	Prevention initiatives, regular monitoring	Ongoing updates, recognising early signs of vicarious trauma

By centring survivors not only as providers of testimony but as active participants in the pursuit of justice, the practice note reframes documentation as a space for dignity, trust, and long-term engagement.

Adapting survivor-centred documentation to varied contexts

The practice note recognises that documentation work is undertaken by a diverse range of civil society actors, ranging from small initiatives to larger, well-established NGOs and international coalitions (IAPB, 2025: 33). As such, the recommendations offered throughout the guide are not intended as rigid or prescriptive standards, but rather as flexible and adaptable guidance that must be tailored to fit the varied capacities, resources, and contexts in which documenting organisations operate (IAPB, 2025: 27-29). Documentation initiatives may vary not only in terms of staffing, funding, and infrastructure, but also

in their exposure to risk, the legal and political environment in which they work, and the communities they serve. For this reason, the guide does not impose a universal set of procedural requirements. Instead, it encourages organisations to adopt what is feasible and meaningful within their specific context and their operational constraints. Therefore, the practice note encourages all initiatives, regardless of size or scope, to think critically about the balance between what they can offer and the expectations that may be created when engaging with survivors.

Furthermore, the structure of the note demonstrates a clear commitment to accessibility and adaptability. The guide is written in simple, non-technical language, with bulleted recommendations, diagrams, and summaries that make it usable in various organisational contexts.

The civil society's expanding role in accountability for torture

The publication of this practice note also reflects a broader trend where we see an increasing centrality of civil society in pursuing accountability for torture, especially where international or domestic mechanisms are ineffective, stalled, or absent.

In this setting, the ethical and strategic challenges are substantial. How can organisations maintain security and trust with survivors over time, particularly when the justice process may take a considerable amount of time in a context where reprisal is a risk? How can traumatised individuals be engaged meaningfully, in ways that respect their agency, not just their testimony? The practice note offers a response to help when countering these dilemmas.

As the guide notes, civil society documenters may in some cases be the only point of contact survivors ever have with the international justice system (IAPB, 2025: 8). This underscores their dual responsibility: to act ethically and to build trust not just as a procedural matter, but as an act of justice.

Final reflections: From principles to practice

For audiences working on the prevention of torture, redress, or legal accountability, this practice note is a valuable resource, both theoretically and operationally. Its strength lies not only in the clarity of its principles but in the practicality of its recommendations on what good practices could be. But perhaps most importantly, it encourages documentation teams to work with humility, patience, and care, rather than treating survivors solely as case files and evidence sets.

The note also reminds us that documentation is not a neutral act. How we collect, store, and share testimony, including what questions we ask, how we listen and how we follow up, can either reproduce harm or help repair it. The act of docu-

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menting must not deepen the violence it seeks to expose - instead, it must create a space for survivors to be heard on their own terms and with the support they need. Resources like this practice note can therefore help ensure that survivors remain at the centre, not the margins, of future collective efforts.

References:

IAPB. (2025). A SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACH TO DOCUMENTATION FOR CRIMINAL ACCOUNTABILITY. In <https://iapbelarus.org/resources/>. International Accountability Platform for Belarus. https://iapbelarus.org/app/uploads/2025/06/SCA-Paper_EN.pdf