Human Rights – Conversations Across Generations
Episode: Iain Guest
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MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:05
Hi, welcome to our podcast, Human Rights, Conversations Across Generations. I'm Meredith Lockwood, founder of Lockwood Creative, a purpose-driven creative agency. And I'm here with my dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:17
And I'm Professor Bert Lockwood, the director of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:27
Together, we are your father-daughter co-hosts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:30
For over 50 years, I've had a front-row seat to the evolution of international human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:35
And now, we're sharing that expertise with you by connecting to the powerful stories and insights of human rights voices from around the world.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:43
We bridge the past and the present, making complex human rights issues more approachable and understandable.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:51
So, pu up a chair and join our table as we speak with Nobel Peace Prize recipients, political leaders and the world's leading human rights scholars and activists.

Track 7 1:03
Hi, listeners. Today, we are joined by our dear friend, Iain Guest. Iain is the founder of the Advocacy Project, a journalist, and a human rights advocate. And he is someone whose work has helped shape conversations around disappearances, transitional justice, and survivor-led advocacy for decades. Ian's career has taken from reporting for The Guardian and the International Herald Tribune to documenting disappearances in Argentina, producing BBC documentaries, and working with United Nations in Cambodia and Haiti Iain later taught human rights at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. It is through his early work disappearances in Argentina that he and my dad first came to know one another, when my dad accepted Ian's manuscript for what would become the very first book in the University of Pennsylvania Press. Before we get started, I want to note that this conversation was recorded on April 1st, 2026, several weeks before we lost one of the giants in human rights, Theo Van

Boven, who passed away on May 9th at the age of 91. Theo, the pioneering Dutch human rights scholar and former United Nations was a dear friend of both my dad and Iain's Theo's work and influence are reflected throughout our discussion today. We begin this episode with my dad reflecting on a memory of the first encounter he had with Ian surrounding Argentina's dirty and the moment their past first crossed more than 40 years ago. Let's tune in

BERT LOCKWOOD 2:53
it, it brought back and, uh, the particular memory that it brought back was, I had just agreed do a book series for the University of Pennsylvania Press. Um, and, uh, the, first manuscript that I got was, from uh, journalist, that covering the, um, situation in Argentina, but it had, three basic places it focused on. One, Argentina and the, the disappearances, but also, Washington, D. C., foreign policy kind of stuff, but then Geneva and the, uh, The, uh, English said that, that he had attempted to publish it with a commercial press they said they would be interested as long as he took out the part about Geneva. And that, That, of to me was the most interesting part of Argentine government's campaign to prevent the UN from taking up situation in wh Theo Van Boven hero of book. was really sort of proud of in that this came with no footnotes probably wouldn't have been the one that you would normally think, well, this will be the one to start out a scholarly series in human rights. But it was absolutely just a wonderful read. And there was something journalists, they know how to write and tell a story. And was curious, do you have journalists that you admire that are currently of human rights situations around the world?

IAIN GUEST 4:37
Well, what a good question, Bert. you know, that was such a long time ago, wasn't it? I mean, that was, I hate to date us, but that was like 40 years ago or something, something insane.

Not really. You know,but to your question, journalists I follow who write about human rights? Not really. I mean, journalism has become a, is a very different animal today And, you know, everybody is a self-publisher in some respects. I mean, we all use social media and a lot of people are turning to Substack. And, of course, the conventional media has been under siege by the current administration and the economic forces, I think, are creating more centralization. that's probably very bad overall. I have to say that, you know, I've been following the coverage of this Iran with tremendous concern. I mean, the war itself is, of course, enormously alarming and definitely illegal as far as I'm concerned. But the coverage has also been, I think, extraordinary. I'm amazed at the number of publications that have just fallen in line behind this theory you know, it's been a brilliant military success. And that seemed to have tone that was struck from day one. And, you know, even The Economist is talking about the stunning success this war and the use of weapons. It reminds me of Leonard Cohen's wonderful phrase in one of his songs. You may know it. Guide by the beauty of our weapons. I mean, this whole war has been the sort the praise of weapons and of course You know, we've been down that route before, haven't we? Shock and awe, then the body counts in Vietnam. I mean, I, we just never learn. And I'm, I'm rather surprised, and I must say very disappointed at the way that so many, um, media outlets have fallen in line behind that, that kind of idea. I mean, this has been a disastrous war in, from every perspective. But anyway,

that's way off the point. I mean, your question is about human rights Bert. And I think one point I would say is that, back in the day, you know, 40 years ago, human rights were a real niche issue for journalists, like myself. I mean, I'd been sent to Geneva by The to cover the United Nations and to cover humanitarian issues in general, refugee crises. And Geneva was quite important at that point because, the Cold War was far from over, and so a lot of things happened in Geneva. It was kind of a, um, a meeting place, if you like. Different ideologies came together, and there was quite a lot of really interesting things happening. I got pulled into human rights very indirectly because, uh, in 1977 I began to become aware that there were, uh, Argentinians who were coming to the UN, to, to really make the case that something horrible was happening in their country. So I was intrigued by that. It was a legitimate, mainstream, important news story. And I didn't think of it as a human rights story, I didn't think of it as a human rights story, per se, but then I stayed on that story for, you know, several years, as it were. And it opened just uh, extraordinary amount uh, very interesting stuff. And of course, lots of incredible stories, which I then turned into this book. But, you know, I came into this book, and you're right, I took a, to a publisher, and they said, "Well, we love the stuff about all the disappearances in Argentina, but we're not very keen on that stuff about the United Nations." And what again, what is the United Nations again,

Well, I said, well, is not the right home for me, and I took my, I took and you were very bold, but you were very courageous, and you said, yeah, okay, let's go with it. And then you forced me to add footnotes, let's be clear about this. I mean, my book has more footnotes than the Bible, probably, um, or as long

BERT LOCKWOOD 8:47
what, right. But when you sent me the manuscript, you said that, you know, if I was interested, you would be willing you know, add the footnotes. you, you sort of understood that from the beginning, that if it were to be in quote, scholarly series, that needed to have footnotes.

IAIN GUEST 9:04
Well, that extended the life of the project by several years, of course, but, you know, Bert, y have done an incredible job, and, and your, your series for the University of Pennsylvania is just essential reading, I think, for anyone who's interested in human rights,and I, I can't tell you how proud I am to have helped kick it

BERT LOCKWOOD 9:22
and I'm very proud to have your book, because I, I still students incoming students, if you will, that say they're, uh, interested in human rights, what I recommend that they, they read? your book is one that I refer them to, to get them sort of the, on the and it's because it reads like a

IAIN GUEST 9:40
well, that's there, uh, uh, but Meredith, I must say, but Meredith, let me come back to you. You're the host of this discussion. I mean, one of the themes that we've been talking about for this discussion is actually to go back to that book, and the case of Argentina, and the disappearances, back in the late 1970s, and then to bring, you know, to fast forward to where

we are today, because I've been making the case to you in our conversations, that so much has changed, and that we can actually draw some very interesting conclusions by, you know, comparing what happened back then in Argentina, with what is happening today, then how the United Nations and the international system are dealing with that change. So, I don't know if you'd like to put that into the context.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 10:27
Yeah. You know, I think for our listeners to give them a little more context is the book title that you have been discussing is called Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War Against Human Rights in the United Nations. And for our listeners, this was the first book in my dad's pen series that you've heard us talk about throughout this podcast. So this is a really exciting conversation to kick off 40-plus years of friendship and correspondence between Ian and my dad. And it is a great reflective conversation to talk about what happened in Argentina. Ian, you had first-hand accounts of survivors there. And now presently, a big project you've worked on is Nepal. And I think what's really critical for these conversations to draw connections and to bring people in is to share those human stories. And your background as a journalist, are there any stories from your time in Argentina working on your book that you could share with our listeners to really give them a first-hand account of what it was like during that time to be able to compare it to present day?

IAIN GUEST 11:36
Yes. I mean, I'd be happy Because I still remember it extremely well. I remember how those people came from Argentina, absolutely desperate, and they were scared. They were scared because the regime in Argentina was truly terrifying. And just to kind of put that into context. in 1976, the Argentinian military seized control from President Isabel Perón. they ruled until 1983, after the Malvinas War. And they adopted a which had actually been patented by the Nazis in World War II. The Nazis called it the "Night in the Night in the Night and the Night and the Night and Fog decrees where they would just go in, pick people up and then disappear them. So that any legal process, which was extremely inconvenient, because basically what they wanted to do was to kill them. Now the Pinochet in 1973 had chosen a different His regime arrested thousands and thousands of people, packed them into the football stadium, took them off and tortured them and killed them for the whole world to see. So when the Argentinian military came in 1976, they said, we're not going to do it that way. And they launched program of disappearances. That's the same before. And the people who came to partly to escape, but also to appeal to the United were really very scared. And I can remember, you know, meeting them under the bridge, the dead of night in Geneva, getting their stories firsthand.

Argentinian embassy in Geneva was run by a totally ruthless individual. And the Argentinian embassy in Paris set up a cell of Basically,

secret service. well, they were actually serving officers in them in the Navy in Argentina, and their job was to identify and eliminate opponents of the regime in Europe. And there was, at one point at this tremendous feud officials at the Argentinian embassy in Paris, and one of

them was killed in that. So they were totally ruthless. And their tentacles, the tentacles of that operation extended throughout Europe, and they would go after their opponents. And the people who came to Geneva knew And so a lot of my research had to be done fairly clandestinely, if you like. And as I began to publish stories in the the embassy in Geneva, or the mission in realized that I was not on their side. And when I went to UN meetings, and the Argentinian ambassador was also present,I remember once he pointed a finger at me, sitting up in the gallery, and said, "I'm going to get you, or we're going to get you." when I later went back to Argentina in 1984, to do my research for the worked, wormed my way into the team of the prosecutor, and that was putting together evidence to prosecute the military people who'd been responsible for the terror. And I found a lot of files that had sent from the mission in Geneva, and were being used by the prosecution, and they opened the files up to me. I found a lot of, uhm, cables which had been sent back from the mission in Argentina about me and about Theo Van Boven, about the United Nations, very, very personal, and it kind of opened a window, if you like, on the work that I'd been doing, which I thought was kind of fairly standard for a reporter. So, you know, it was deeply personal and, uhm, very, very few Argentinians escaped from that terror. You know, the heart of it was, uh, what was a Navy mechanics school right in the middle of Buenos Aires, the death squads used to go out in the middle of the night, t would pick people up, they would put a hood on them, they'd take them back to this Navy, cadet school, where they would be taken up top to a room at the top called the capucha, it was called, and then every now and then they would be taken down to basement where they would be tortured. And after they squeezed whatever information out of them that they could, they took them off, uh, in helicopters and dropped them over the river plate. Um, and it is estimated, you know, that several thousand people died in that Navy mechanics school in the middle of the Buenos Aires. Um, and when I was going, when I was doing my research, you know, I tried to get into that school, in 1983. I remember sort of walking up and knocking on the door as it were. And it was still active in those days. And, and, uh, they did not let me which was, you know, their loss. Uh, uh, but anyway, so it was very intense. And the people who came to Geneva were sort of living, living proof of the, of the terror, if you like. and I can remember one story of a prisoner who was up in the capucha in the, in the top, and then was taken down to the torture room, and he was sitting on a bench outside the room where people were tortured. And a Navy officer came past him, recognized him as being a former friend of his at school. the guy was wearing a ball and chain around his, around his leg and, and said to him, I said, what are you doing here? And, um, he said, well, I don't know. I mean, I don't know what he said. I guess I'm here to be tortured or whatever. Anyway, the Navy officer ordered the ball and chain to be taken off his leg, took him out for a night of drinking in the bars of Buenos Aires, and then brought him back in the morning and delivered him to the same bench outside the torture room. And he, and he then went in where they, you they tortured him. And he was one of maybe 50 or 60 people who survived that. School.

BERT LOCKWOOD 17:53
Wow.

IAIN GUEST 17:54

And there he was in Geneva, you know, and he rolled up his, his trouser leg and he showed me the scars from the ball and chain that he'd been carrying around in uh, in that center in Buenos Aires. So it was a very personal, it was very interesting, very dramatic. It caught my attention as a reporter and also as a, a writer. And I think, you know, played quite an important role in my own personal development. and I think in the years since I've become a, a certainly human rights advocate and activist. I taught for many as an adjunct professor at Georgetown University taught human rights. So, you know, that set me off on my own personal journey. but it also showed me, I think, um, how venomous governments can be when they go off, the rails. And how important human rights is as a tool for holding governments accountable and for giving people, individuals, a voice. Now that's all Argentina. And I'll, I'll stop there and pause there, Meredith. But, you know, when we come forward, fast forward to Nepal, there are many similarities between the situation in Nepal now and Argentina back there, which I think are interesting. But there are also some huge differences, which I think make it even more interesting.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 19:14
Yes. And, you know, Iain, part of research, you know. : And message in the book is your perspective on the disappearances and transitional justice as a "litmus test for the effectiveness of international human rights protection", which again goes into discussion of the government and then international institutions like the United Nations. to stay on Argentina and stay in the 1980s for a second, for you and my dad, how governments take a role in these human rights atrocities and if I'm correct from your book, Iain, that in 1981, the Reagan administration sided with the Argentinian regime. And due to that, it truly undercut the United Nations action against the disappearances and also weakened its chances of playing a positive role in aiding the Latin American transition from dictatorship to democracy. Is that accurate? :

IAIN GUEST 20:18
Yes, that is accurate. I think the key event here, Meredith, was in 1980, uh, the United Nations established a working group on disappearances, which was a very, very, very, very significant in of human rights, because it was the first that, the UN had set up a thematic working group as opposed to a country-specific working group. So there had been working groups on Israel, for example, in the occupied territories, on South Africa, and on Chile. Um, but there had not been thematic working and this was partly a compromise because that the UN was concerned that if they just went after Argentina and the disappearances, that there would be a lot of pushback and resistance. So they broadened it to the issue of disappearances only

And in the process, they were able to expand the investigation and the working group to many other countries and governments that were actually this policy. And that made broader and more effective. And it took some of the, sort of, direct confrontation out of the mandate. That working group has remained absolutely front and center in the UN's work ever since. And it took some of the sort of direct confrontation out of the

BERT LOCKWOOD 21:39

and I, think on the original working group that Teun van was a member of that. Did you know Teun

IAIN GUEST 21:45
I knew him very well, and I know he's a good, a good, he was a good friend of yours, Bert

BERT LOCKWOOD 21:50
Yeah.

IAIN GUEST 21:50
yeah, five, five members. And, uh, you know, the, the working group has, of course, been reconstituted many times over. and some very eminent human rights people have, have sat on that group. you may know, Professor Ariel Dolitzky, uh, he's now teaching in Texas. he was the first, I think one of the first chair people, uh, of that working group, and he had two aunts who disappeared in Argentina. So the working group was very significant, um, for many different reasons.

BERT LOCKWOOD 22:23
Yeah. he, he's written, an article, in the human rights quarterly And then I've now accepted a second article be in the future.

IAIN GUEST 22:32
Great. He's, he's very good. Meredith, coming back to your question about the Reagan administration. So the Carter administration, which of course had been very committed to human rights,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:42
Mm-hmm.

IAIN GUEST 22:43
was solidly behind the establishment of this working group and played a very important role in getting it started. And then when the Reagan administration came in, they viewed human rights as a to the, um, freedom, if you like, of the U. S. government. and they went all uh, to undermine it. and of course, Argentina was viewed as an ally of the United States, rather amazingly. And I say this as a Brit, um, so when the Falklands-Malvinas war broke out, the, the Reagan administration was sitting on the fence and that infuriated the British government. I mean, that's another story altogether. the, the long and the short of it is that Ambassador Gene Kirkpatrick, who was the U. S. ambassador at the United Nations, the counteroffensive, if you like, against the U. N.'s human rights work after President Reagan came in. And uh, one of the decisions they took was to go. And, um, remove the Dutch head of the Human Rights Secretariat, whose name was Theo van Boven, who played a very important role in building this sort of strong, independent UN human rights machinery.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 23:58

I've had the honor of meeting Theo in the Netherlands.

IAIN GUEST 24:02
Exactly. was sacked. And, uh, it was personally devastating for him. I knew him very well, because I've got a lot of stories from well, maybe I shouldn't confess that, but anyway.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 24:16
Off the record. We can edit that.

IAIN GUEST 24:18
I it was devastating for him and his family because he was very highly thought of, of course, in the human rights community. an actually I saw him like, three or four months

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 24:28
Oh, really?

IAIN GUEST 24:29
For the first time in many years, it was a true delight.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 24:32
Did you go to Maastricht?

IAIN GUEST 24:34
Maastricht? I did. I went to Maastricht and I met him. And actually, Bert you, you'll be pleased by uh, the material that I collected from my book on Argentina back in the 1980s, um, I've kept ever since. Um, and I'm going to give it to the Maastricht, um, law center. Um, Which is establishing a kind of archive, uh, in the name in Teo's, uh, in Teo's honor. So that will sort of round the story off.

BERT LOCKWOOD 25:04
Oh, That's wonderful. Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 25:06
Ian, do you also know Cees Flinterman?

IAIN GUEST 25:09
I do.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 25:10
Okay.

IAIN GUEST 25:11
I do. I mean, the Dutch were very prominent when it came to human rights back in those days. And they sent a whole series of extremely capable and smart people through Geneva. I mean,

they took the UN very seriously and they continue to today. Thank God, because there are plenty of other governments who don't. So it was jarring, you know, to go from the Carter administration, which gone out, I think full, full throttle to try and, bring the disappearances to a halt, um, and strengthen the United Nations, even if it meant embarrassing the U. S. itself in public on occasions, because uh, the benefits to international law was, of course, tremendous from having a stronger United Nations. That's the essence of multilateralism. And then the Reagan people came in and said, no, that's completely wrong. That undermines our strategic interests. That means you go after our allies, like Argentina, like El Salvador, like Guatemala, were all, you know, viewed as, as allies in the great fight against communism by the Reagan administration. And so we had a complete turnaround in U. S. policy. And now today, you know, we're living through yet another turnaround, aren't we?

BERT LOCKWOOD 26:31
I

IAIN GUEST 26:32
And, and have to say to you, you're both American, I'm a Brit, um, the rest of the world is just kind of flabbergasted at these changes in U. S. policy. We just do not. What's going to come next.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 26:47
We are too. And, and for our listeners, Ian lives on American soil, but he, he is a proud Brit. it's, I'm gonna let you take that, Dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 26:57
yeah, no, we're in very challenging times and, I think we're going to win. I'm optimistic on that. And part of that optimism comes from, the students I have, I think generationally that, u, there's little support for the, current, uh, administration and destructive path, that it's on. Um, so that gives me some reason for, for hope that we'll through this, but it's, it's, it's definitely, uh, a

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 27:31
According today to our listeners on April 1st, and I, and I wish this headline was an April fool's day, but it's not, it really is happening today and it's a very unprecedented move that Trump is at the Supreme Court in person hearing the argument end birthright citizenship. a it is the first time ever a U S president has attended a Supreme Court argument

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:58
he attended only half of it, Meredith.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 28:00
Half,

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:01

didn't

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 28:01
okay.

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:02
listen opposition's arguments.

IAIN GUEST 28:09
Well, look. both of you Lockwoods, this is actually. I think quite a good segue into, another point that I really want propose to both of you. And that is that the nature of human rights and the human rights mission has really changed, in my view, uh, and shifted. and that is partly due to, uh, the attitude of governments, particularly the US the, and the Russians, who are showing absolutely zero interest for international human rights. But it's also, I uh, changed as a result of the emergence in many of, of the countries in the global South, of a local human rights movement, of people who have been directly affected by these problems, Um, and who are standing up to claim their rights and take action. And, you know, my own story, Meredith, which you, you started out by very kindly sort of flagging that. U, so when I was a reporter, you know, I was writing about Argentina and about the establishment of this working group back in 1980, which was very exciting. And very innovative. And, and began to call governments to account left, right, and center for the disappearances. Uh, but that has changed now. I mean, 40 years on. And I, I, I, you know, if you'll give me a few minutes, I'd like to explain how Nepal illustrates some of the changes, 'cause I think they are very instructive.

BERT LOCKWOOD 29:44
Yeah, please do.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 29:46
For our listeners, this is going to be very educational, Iain, 'cause I don't think a lot of people have the firsthand experience that you do sharing those stories of Nepal and knowing that history.

IAIN GUEST 29:59
Okay. The first thing is to, I think, look at the working group on disappearances itself. And, um, in preparation for this discussion with my.

from the two Lockwood generations, I went back and took a look at the latest report by that work. Disappearances. And I was told that the working group between 1980 sorry, 2025. Sorry. 20, 25. Had reported 63,000 cases of disappearances to 115 different governments. Over the years.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 30:39
63,000.

IAIN GUEST 30:40
63,000 disappearances, which shows How extensive. disappearances has become. is very, very, very alarming. The second statistic, which I think is also alarming, is that 50,000 of those cases have not been clarified. So every year the working group. Um.

Gets more evidence about disappearances, reports it to government, and nothing happens. and in fact, out of the, over these 40 years, only, I mean, very, very, very small number of cases have been clarified and most of them, were found to have died. So, I have had this discussion with friends at the UN. That has led me to become, I think, not skeptical about that working group, because very capable people have sat on it. And it is extremely to have this record of disappearances. But when it comes to actually solving those cases, And. Doing for the family members. And the relatives. What they need. That working group. Has clearly not done the trick. Now. They are not. I think part of the problem is. That they are not visiting the countries. Where the problem is most severe. Fo obvious reasons. There are security problems. There are security threats. But also. They are not getting invited by the government. Because the government knows full That a UN investigation. Is going to. Go into prisons. And look for people. And open graves. And that kind of stuff. So. I hesitate. To call that working group. A success. After 40 years. And.

BERT LOCKWOOD 32:26
Now, would you, would you suggest one of the they're not being sort of, granted, uh, access by governments is that there less pressure on those governments uh, support, uh, U. N. initiatives?

IAIN GUEST 32:45
Well, I would say very definitely Bert, I mean, they have had invitations, or they have invitations on the table from Cyprus, Canada, uh, Bangladesh, which is quite interesting, uhm, and Guatemala, and last year they visited Lithuania. Now Lithuania is not known for disappearing people, so, I mean, I think that the visits that they make, in-country visits, which are absolutely essential, because that's where they meet the family members face to face, and they hear the stories, are, are, are just not happening. And, you know, one of, one of the most events in, the Argentina story was when Pat Darian, who was the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights under Jimmy Carter, went down to Buenos Aires, met with family uh, under the, uh, U. S. Embassy a, an underground parking garage. An, it had to be done very carefully because the Argentinian military were all over the place. that direct, that direct person to person people to people contact, is not there for that working group. Now, let, let's, let's be clear. There have been many other procedures which have evolved over the years, and the number of investigations has expanded dramatically, uh, country specific investigations, also thematic investigations, summary executions, uhm, obviously torture, and you know, and other examples of, of, of thematic investigations. Uh, if you like. And in one months time, uh, a very prominent, uhm, UN, uh, investigator who is a Canadian law professor called Bernard Duhaime in Montreal will be going to Nepal.

Uh,

his mandate is to investigate truth, uh, and, and, um, memory and reparations. Uh, so that's his job is to go around the world and look at the state of,of those issues in, in governments to report and investigate. Uh, he received an, an, an, an invitation from the previous government. There was a recent election in Nepal. So he will be going in June. And he will be going at a really, really important time. Because Nepal politics has changed very dramatically. and survivors, uh, uh, in Nepal, uh, in Nepal of the conflict and family members of the disappeared are very much hoping that they can meet with him directly and that he can broker a, a dialogue between them and the new government. Now that to me is the kind of direct contact that can be incredibly useful and incredibly important. So you know, that's sort of my perspective on the, on the UN process, if you like the UN procedures. Now, what's happened in Nepal, Meredith, if, if you'll permit me to come back to that story, just briefly.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 35:39
yes. And, Iain, you could also maybe share on what, what was the first connective tissue that led you to your work in Nepal as well as you, as you shared this background.

IAIN GUEST 35:50
of course, my own career after I wrote that book, took a series of turns, which were not, uh, I did not expect to have happened. but in the 1990s, I worked for the United Nations in Cambodia in Haiti and did missions in the Great Lakes in Rwanda after the genocide. Um, and in, uh, and in, uh, 1996, I was sent to Bosnia USAID, um, bless their hearts, uh, to do, uh, um, a mapping of civil society. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know. But how did you know that before? Yeah. And I was absolutely astounded by what I found. You know, Bosnia had been a communist country before the war and everything was very controlled. these communities have been under so much pressure during the war in Bosnia that they were starting to take initiatives. And they had this, the spirit of self-sufficiency, self-reliance in these beleaguered communities had led to an extraordinary growth in civil society. It was like pulling up a stone and seeing all this sort of movement underneath it. and so that really was the report that we wrote for USAID, and I felt then that that community-based perspective was not being, properly understood by the development world and donors, and so we started a little non-profit called The Advocacy Project, in 1998 when I came back to the States. And, our mission, uh, is to help, uh, advocates for vulnerable communities tell their story and then take action for social change. U, I've been doing that combined with my teaching for, you know, the last 20, 20 years or so, and it is incredibly rewarding because it brings me into contact with all of these amazing people, including family members of those who disappeared in Nepal. And that's how I uh, came into contact with, uh, with Nepal. so Nepal went through a 10 year conflict between 1996 and 2006, which was absolutely horrible. Tens of thousands of people were killed and tortured. About 1700 disappeared, um, uh, their family members and relatives have formed an extraordinarily effective And cohesive movement to claim reparations, um, to, uh, dema the truth, to be part of the process of healing, which all countries, which emerge from conflict have to go through. And as we know from Germany, Japan onwards, that process of coming to terms with a brutal war or brutal past is a very, very difficult one. Wrenching. Um, and so, uh, in Nepal, what you see is you see this, um, very united, cohesive and really extremely

impressive group of families across the country who have formed this movement. and but this is really what I'd love to get your perspective on this, Bert. what, what we found in the last three or four years is there's been a lot of tension in Nepal between the family members on the one hand who have very practical needs and the human rights groups on the others. on the other hand, uh, who are demanding legal accountability for the crimes that were committed during that war. Now, um, Nepal is different, Meredith, from Argentina because the people who disappeared in Argentina back in, the 1970s and 1980s were largely middle class. gets the, the threat that was perceived by the regime came from a left-wing group called the Montaneros who were, very ideologically committed, very smart. Most of them have been to university. They were middle class, and they were very much part of the establishment. The problem in Nepal is totally different. the, the victims. in Nepal were mainly from, um, an indigenous group in central Nepal called the Taru, who live across five or six different districts in central Nepal, who are one of the most marginalized, um, communities in Nepal. They're very far from the mainstream of society, from the economy. the level of literacy is much, much lower than in the capital, Kathmandu. Those are the stakeholders when it comes to Nepal and the, and the issue of the disappearances and rebuilding and transitional justice. Those are the people who are on the front line. Very, very different from Argentina back in the 1970s. and also, I, Bert, I think you see that in, for example, in Peru, where most of the victims of the Shining Path revolution, uh, the revolutionary war. Were indigenous people from Ayacucho. Again, very,very far from the mainstream of Peruvian society. And what that means is that the challenge that they face in rebuilding after this horror is very different from the challenge that was perceived in Argentina and elsewhere. and, you know, it's, it's, it's been so interesting to me to, the more time I've spent in Nepal with these, with these families. And I have been there many times now since 2015, the more I realize that their needs are very practical. Becaus, you know, if somebody disappeared in a village back in 1996, for example, or '97 in Nepal, what happened was the cadres would come through the village and they would knock on a door and demand food. And if they were refused by the family, the family got shot, and if they opened the door and gave the cadres food and then the soldiers went off, the rest of the villagers assumed that that family was collaborating with the Maoist rebels. So they reported them to the military and the police, the police would come in and they would get taken off, disappe, tortured, whatever. So when you ask a family in Nepal what they most need after being through this kind of experience, their answer is not legal accountability. They're not interested in those soldiers and police being hauled in front of a court and called to account for something that happened 30 years ago. What they want is they want compensation for the loss of the breadwinner because they're farming people. And so if you lose the man and the family, that's a disaster. But they also want recognition from their neighbours and from society. They want to be accepted back into society. And so just to just to kind of, this is a long answer, Meredith, to this question, but just to kind of round this point off. Family relatives, survivors in Nepal that I have spoken One, what they want most of all is they want, they want acceptance and recognition for what they've been through. Secondly, they want to be able to commemorate their lost ones in a manner of their own choosing. Thirdly, they want history. They want the truth to be recognised and enter the history books. They want some kind of financial reparation for their loss. And only then do they want legal accountability. Now, for the international NGOs, the legal groups, it's the exact reverse. And that difference between the

family members on the one hand and the conventional NGOs, if you like, the human rights NGOs and the other, it has been very, very profound. And there's been a lot of tension over the last five years, a lot of disagreement. you know, I never I never expected this. I thought these would be two natural allies, if you like, in the campaign to rebuild Nepal and to restore respect for the rule of law and for human rights. So I think for me, that's been the biggest eye opener of the work I've done in Nepal. And of course, it is very different from the Argentina story that we were talking about.

BERT LOCKWOOD 44:51
would say, I think the most recent book in my Pen series is dealing with this question of reparations. That it's very interesting, complexity, I guess, reparations, but some are museums established to the histories to preserve the stories of what happened and the And the like that it's sort of a rich variety and it's not simply monetary. not what they're looking for often, but to sort of preserve stories of what happened to their relatives friends. that's the latest book in my Penn series. And I another book has also recently published a book along the same My. book was done mainly Australian authors for some reason that had studied this this issue. yeah, it is a part of human rights story

IAIN GUEST 45:58
you know,

BERT LOCKWOOD 45:58
yeah,

IAIN GUEST 45:59
it really it really is. It really it really is Bert, and the first UN rapporteur to investigate reparations was Theo van Boven.

BERT LOCKWOOD 46:07
Wow.

IAIN GUEST 46:08
Back to Holland, of course, and became and has become a very well-respected human rights professor. uhm, you know, what I find very, again, very interesting about reparations is that, what you see in Nepal, you see a number of communities and municipalities which are really taking the lead on this. So, for example, a family member gets elected to be the mayor of a municipality, hi father disappeared, and so he has the power and the money to actually set up a commemoration. Now, the commemoration, as you say, can take different forms, I mean, some places it's a tree, in other places it's a shrine where they leave, uhm, belongings of the people who disappeared, in other places it could be the name of a street, so there are different ways, uh, to offer reparations, they don't need.

BERT LOCKWOOD 47:05
Yeah, and I, yeah, and I think the Naval Mechanics School in Argentina is a museum now.

IAIN GUEST 47:13
It is. It is. so, so let me put, let me put this one to you, Bert. What, what this means in Nepal is that you centers of activity on reparations, particularly in the center of the country in, in Bhardia district, for example, which was worst hit by the disappearances. And, uh, within the country where there is a lot of activity and a lot of innovation and a lot of imagination. But then you have areas of the rest of the country, where nothing's happening. I've spoken to some human rights, of, you know, traditional human rights advocates on this. They're kind of alarmed by this because, know, human rights implies universality. It implies respect for a central and centralized legal approach. And that's exactly what you're not seeing in Nepal. You're seeing initiatives in this municipality, in that area there, this region here, different forms of, of commemoration and, um, t telling and truth seeking, which is anything but universal. um, I mean, for example, Meredith, you're talking about, uh, I was talking about our little organization. we have done several projects with, uh, family members of the disappeared in Nepal. And one of them, uh, was um, help a group of women in Bhardia to describe what had happened to their relatives through stitching.

BERT LOCKWOOD 48:40
Ah,

IAIN GUEST 48:40
they tell that story through stitching. We then take their stories and assemble them into what we call advocacy quilts. And we then use those advocacy quilts to advocate on their behalf. So for example, I took two quilts that they had made in Bhardia to the UN working group on disappearances three or four years ago. And I showed them these quilts, which are kind of spectacular. And I said, look, this is what's been happening to these families as they remember it. And each story, you know, shows a father being arrested at gunpoint and taken off, never to reappear. So just to kind of come back to this point, there are different ways, I think, for the family members to, to remember and commemorate their lost ones. And there are different initiatives and there are, but, but the key to it all, the key, the heart and soul of it all is getting recognition from your neighbors and your, your community. What happened to your neighbors. Having your neighbors come to you and say, we were wrong back then. We're sorry. You were badly treated. I found that is more important than actually getting money. Remarkably. I, I find, I find that extremely interesting.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 50:00
That is remarkable. Changing hearts and minds over the financial. Factor that when I think we immediately hear reparations, we think of the financial factor and the duty of a government that has wronged its citizens to financially reimburse them. I mean, we have it here in America, you know, HR 40 bill was put for the American reparations for black ancestors that their ancestors were slaves. But I find that, I don't think, you know, we talk enough about that from a survivor led campaign, their voices, that they want recognition.

BERT LOCKWOOD 50:41

Iain, I don't know if you ever had any contact with the late Marjorie Agosin, who, taught at Wellesley, in the Spanish department, but, uh, she was Chilean, and she wrote a book called Scraps of Cloth, and, it was about these, I don't know if I'm pronouncing it correctly, arpieras, were a traditional form of in Argentina, but that the families of the disappeared, used this traditional form of art to these uh, scraps of

IAIN GUEST 51:18
Right. So, let me just sort round this story off, if you like, tie the loose ends together and say that in spite of the differences between Argentina and Nepal and the different approaches of the human rights people in both cases, the conventional UN approach, if you like, to Argentina, the very unconventional approach, which is led by survivors and family members in Nepal, in spite of that, there is one thing that both of those situations have in common. And that is the overwhelming power and influence of families. Uh, remember that Argentina would, if we had to say what, what was most remarkable about the dictatorship in Argentina, what was most extraordinary, many of us would say the madres, the mothers of the Plaza de Maya. And the grandmothers of the Plaza de Maya, there was even a group called the hijos, the children of the disappeared, in Argentina, who, who are still active in Argentina and they would go into restaurants where they would see a former military officer kind of having dinner. And they would sort of stand there and they would sort of stand there and the family movement, uh, in Argentina, uh, in Argentina was, I think one of the most influential forces in the history of human rights, if it hadn't been from the mothers of the, of the, of the disappeared in Argentina, who knows what would have happened. But what I do know is that when Argentina finally emerged from the horror and democracy was established, those mothers had given, uh, Argentinians a reason to be proud during that incredibly bleak period. and, and they had sort of, you know, held the opposition together, if you like, and with their courage. And of course, many of the mothers themselves disappeared,they were seized and killed, or several of them were. Now, if we fast forward to Nepal, we see exactly the same thing. this campaign is being driven by family members who lost, their fathers, their, their sons, their brothers. the psychology of this is incredibly important because, you know, if you ask somebody who's um, a close relative to a horror like that, why is this important? it's kind of a silly question, isn't it? Well, well, can't you do something else? You um, the disappearances are no longer a priority in the human rights world. it's actually whatever it might be, the right to water or something else. They do not have the luxury of moving on to the latest issue de jour. They are focused, they are motivated, and they are relentless. And that makes them the best and most effective advocates. They're also incredibly brave. I mean, so you see this all over the world, Mexico, Turkey, all of the places where disappearances have taken place and are taking place. The movement is being led by family members. And, you know, that's another takeaway from me from all of these years of work on human rights. And I think that they are the bedrock of, know, human rights defense, not the lawyers, not the international NGOs, bless their hearts, not Human Rights Watch and Amnesty,but family members, relatives, survivors who have been directly affected by these horrors and will simply not give up.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 54:50

And, you know, two groups that I have volunteered with, um, remotely are Moms Demand Action as well as Everytown. both are grass root movements of everyday Americans. Lots of moms, lots of survivors, lots of students, fighting for the public safety measures to protect people from gun violence here in the United States. And being able to volunteer with those groups, Iain, I completely agree that those voices of survivors, of family members who have lost people in this situation, gun violence, either in schools or, you know, in grocery stores, know, churches, et cetera, um, they are so powerful, their voices and their movement. And we always have to make sure we do center them, and advocate for what they're asking for, nationally and internationally. and Iain, if I may, for our listeners, I just wanted to give them a little more information about the incredible nonprofit you founded, as we've talked about in 2001, the Advocacy Project. and how you empower marginalized communities. And you do this by focusing on the mission to invest in people in communities that exhibit courage and innovation and confronting said challenges. Um, Amplify Stories. You strengthen their organizations by being a partner to them. You also mobilize essential support. You build connections. And you also have Peace Fellows, where you bring students to directly support their partners on the ground. Could we talk a little bit about the Peace Fellows that you have brought to support the Advocacy Project, support your local partners and experience they get, where they can then take that to their communities and also help invest in their career, which may be human rights oriented?

IAIN GUEST 56:49
Good. Well, I'd love uh, Meredith, and, um, the timing is quite good for this question because, uh, this morning, we launched a newsletter, uh, on behalf of a Partnership that we've developed with a group of Rohingya refugees in the Bangladesh refugee camps. and, um, and I'll also say, Bert, that I have received, uh, an inquiry from your student friend, Sarayu, who's a Nepali, who's very interested in this program, working with the survivors in Nepal. we began to recruit, so graduate students to go and volunteer with our local partners back in 2003, when I was teaching at Georgetown and, I put out the word to my students. We had four or five people who went off to Palestine, Bosnia, and Nepal, I think, back in the day. uh, the program has kind of gathered pace I think it's now very well established. We've sent almost 350 graduate students out to 60

BERT LOCKWOOD 57:52
Wow.

IAIN GUEST 57:52
in, Since. And, of course, it's an amazing experience for the students because they learn firsthand. And they're being mentored by these amazing people, um, Meredith on the front lines of human rights, but also they are providing a service, which is not the kind of service that they will get from USAID or from technical. Experts. Um, you know, students are smart, committed, curious, focused, right? Well, very well, very well connected, very good with it, but most of all, they're friendly. And, you know, to people who've lost parents or whose relatives have been tortured or killed, having somebody come to your place for 10 weeks, sit with you by your side, learn from you. Admire what you do be curious about your, your lost, uh,

relatives is incredibly important. So it cuts both ways. And, and for me, it's the, the perfect partnership really between our students in this country in the global North and these community-based groups in the South. So I, I'm very proud and pleased by, uh, what we've done with this program. and as I said, Meredith, just to give you sort of an example of the flavor of it, we're, we're supporting, supporting 14 different community initiatives in eight countries at the moment this year on a tiny budget. We're hoping to send out about maybe seven or eight students from, you know, three or four countries to work in Kenya, Uganda, Nepal, India, and Vietnam. And, the way we work is that if, if we get a request from, a local community group that's directly affected, again, it comes back to this idea if you're directly affected by a problem, then you're going to be an effective advocate. Those are the kind of people we want to work with. So we had a group of, um, very smart students in this Bangladesh camp from Rohingyas, the refugees, the Burmese Muslims who were kicked out of Burma by the regime there and are living in these awful camps in Bangladesh. And they got in touch with us and said, you know, can we help? our, the advocacy project, can we help? Do you have any ideas? And, um, food aid, they're entirely dependent upon international food aid in those camps. And the food aid has been cut as a result of the collapse of USAID and the pressure, on the UN system. So we said to them, well, why don't you start a gardening project? we'll give you a thousand dollars. You go off and buy some seeds. You train some families. You put together some kitchen gardens in between these. Huts, if you like, they said, great idea. They're completing the first harvest and they have produced. One and a half tons of fresh organic vegetables in that refugee camp.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:00:56
Wow.

IAIN GUEST 1:00:56
kind of amazing, actually. And we have another partner who's working in the settlements, Kibera settlements in Nairobi, who's become expert in building kitchen gardens out of recycled waste material. She's now advising the refugees in Bangladesh about how to do the same, because the living conditions in those Nairobi settlements are very similar to the crowded conditions in the refugee camp in Bangladesh. So we have two partners who are talking directly to themselves, and we're not part of that. And that is the kind of work we love to do. We have almost no budget, but we do have the support of students who go in who are really committed and can make a real difference

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:01:43
Iain I would love to an article from for the quarterly about that.

IAIN GUEST 1:01:50
You're on, Bert. But if you do that, Bert, you're going to have to learn all about these weird local vegetables, like the gourds in Bangladesh and Sukuma wiki in the Nairobi settlements, which is a, frankly, rather disgusting sort of vegetable, which is very, very nutritious and high in nutrition.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:11
never heard of it. What is it comparable to?

IAIN GUEST 1:02:14
A mixture between kale and cabbage, I think.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:17
I thought you were going to say kale. Yeah. Kale here in the

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:02:22
that .

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:22
States,

IAIN GUEST 1:02:22
That, I think another example of, you know, how local people who are under pressure in these communities, which are very, very vulnerable. They have no money, they have no services. They're under pressure all the time. How innovative and imaginative they are. And if you just give them a sort of a, a little bit of a push, then they will run with it and they will come up with something that is amazing. And it goes back to the same point that we've been making throughout this conversation. And that is the power of families and the power of people who are directly affected by these issues. And, you know, Bert I would love to see more recognition of this by the conventional development community and the human rights community. Instead of going into Nepal and saying to these people, this is how it's done. You have to call those policemen. You have to get those policemen and soldiers into court. Why don't we go in and talk to these families and say, what do you need? How can we help you? And the same thing

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:03:29
Yeah.

IAIN GUEST 1:03:29
when it comes to development, instead of going in with a preconceived plan that's developed in London or Geneva or New York, we go in and listen to them. And we understand what they need and we understand what they can do really, really well if they're just given a chance. So the whole relationship. Instead of being top down. Experts to ignorance, if you like, it gets flipped.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:03:53
Yeah.

IAIN GUEST 1:03:53
And we're learning. So, you know, with all of this type of work, there is a larger context, which is really kind of important.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:04:03
Fascinating.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:04:05
Iain, for our last note, I always like to do a reflection and advice to our listeners. And I think this is going to be a very fascinating discussion that is eye-opening to our community, particularly focusing on survivors and like you said, their innovation, their commitment, their yearning for recognition. They need, that support around the world. And tying it into, you know, we started off talking about the war in Iran. we are seeing disappearances here in America through ICE. Many people get taken off the streets and their families cannot find out what detention center they're in. for example, I went to the no Kings protest and I spoke to a Latin nonprofit that was advocating for disappeared, undocumented workers. Um, one story they told me was a gentleman named Juan, who was here in Oregon at his job, taken off the streets. His family could not find him. They could not find him through legal services. They were able to find out that he's Louisiana. They have no other information about any justice or deportation rights. Um, the need to is there any advice you would give to our listeners on if they're feeling a bit hopeless or unsure how to get involved in help, how they can take action from supporting the advocacy project, supporting local community, nonprofits in their own city or town, any advice?

IAIN GUEST 1:05:35
Well, certainly not Not to support the advocacy project. I mean,as an organisation, we're not relevant here. um, I, I think, um, I think many organizations become obsessed by their own, you know, their own income and their own, this and their own, that this is not about organizations. This is about impact and about people who are on the front lines. We're not in the front lines. I'm talking to you from Washington. and I've, was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I mean, the stakeholders here in our discussion are those family members in Nepal, the women, uh, in Ukraine who were raped by the Russians, um, the civilians in, in, wherever it might be, you know, Iran, uh, Gaza, who have been destroyed by these wars. That's where the focus is for me for our work in peace development and human rights. But you know, your point is a really good one, Meredith, because around every corner, there is a community initiative which needs our help and our support. We have a huge problem of hunger in this You know, we waste $340 billion of food in our kitchens and restaurants and cafeterias every year. And it's astounding how much food gets wasted. So there's a lot we can do with that. We can help high schools to compost, um, to grow their own food, you know, anything which gets you involved in your local community is not only good for the community. It's also very, very good for us. You know, it gives us a sense of purpose, particularly if you're getting on in life. You know, the number of people I hear who tell me that they want to retire and go off to here or there or travel or this, that the rest of it. I mean, my answer to that is to say, look, this is a difficult time. We all need to roll up our sleeves and we need to get involved. And there's a lot we can do on our own doorstep. So it's all about engagement, personal engagement, I think. And that really is the best way that we can respond to the kind of horror that's going on in this country, whic it is and the rest of the world and hope that things will pass. But do what we can

to strengthen these, advocates and these people, family members that we've been talking about. Does that make sense?

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:07:52
Ian, it's wonderful. Ian, it's wonderful. It's been talking with I miss our conversations,

IAIN GUEST 1:07:57
Let's have another one soon,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:07:59
And it's always such an honor. I know our community knows this, but for me to be able to bear witness on the friendship of you and my dad for over 40 years, I wish we could find your first ever correspondence. love, I'm assuming that's a paper trail back from 19, what would you guys guess was probably the first time, Iain, you wrote to my dad for the book?

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:08:24
Probably a year before the book was published.

IAIN GUEST 1:08:26
It was probably like, "Dear, dear prof, I have

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:08:31
an

IAIN GUEST 1:08:32
idea for you, which is going to sound a bit weird."

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:08:35
So it probably was 1989, because the book came out in 1990.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:08:40
'89, okay, wow. It's right there. I knew you had a copy of it.

IAIN GUEST 1:08:47
if you look back on your life, and I look back on mine, there are certain sort of turning points, there are moments when something happened that changed the trajectory your life, and that was certainly one. When my book got accepted by Bert, and, know, not just accepted, but taken very seriously. That is an enormous boost to one's confidence, and I would like to think that that helped to turn me into, you know, the sort of, I don't know,zealot . I don't know what the right word is.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:09:23
Crusader, yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:09:24
Crusader, I like

IAIN GUEST 1:09:25
I think that has religious overtones.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:09:27
Well,

IAIN GUEST 1:09:27
But ,

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:09:28
human rights is, human rights is a religion,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:09:31
It's my dad's religion.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:09:32
Yeah. It's as close as I get.

IAIN GUEST 1:09:35
you're the connecting tissue between a lot of people who have, know, in the last 50 years, who built the human rights movement. Nigel Rodley, has a whole number of distinguished and actors

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:09:48
you

IAIN GUEST 1:09:48
and advocates. And, you know, I see my job as being to sort of help them down there in those villages and communities. That's my contribution. And it's different from what it was when I was a reporter and a journalist and the rest of it. But it's, I think, no less important and certainly very rewarding for me.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:10:08
I was, I was gonna say just as important, you ever so much.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:10:13
Thank you, Ian, so much for your friendship, for joining

IAIN GUEST 1:10:16
well, it's been a just a huge pleasure to see you both on this together. Father and what, what better, better symbol for, a podcast about.

Track 7 1:10:28
Today's robust discussion with Iain reminds us that some of the most meaningful human rights work happens when local communities and survivors are given the necessary tools and support to lead their own advocacy. My dad and are thankful to Iain for joining us and for sharing his expertise. To learn more about the Advocacy Project and the initiatives discussed, please visit the links in our show notes. If you enjoyed this episode, we would greatly appreciate your support by subscribing to the podcast, leaving a rating or review, or sharing the conversation with others. If there is a guest or topic you would like us to explore in a future episode, you can always reach out to us at humanrightsconversations at gmail.com or visit my website, MeredithLockwood.com to learn more. thank you so much for listening. Until next time.