Hundreds, if not thousands, of people died at the hands of the military government in Argentina during the 1970s. Many people deemed enemies of the state disappeared, only to be found later in mass graves with torture scars and bullet wounds.

Argentina was among the many nations where social, economic and political instability created a climate for covert arrests, torture and executions. Information about the victims of these crimes is collected by governmental and nongovernmental organizations around the world. To be effective, this information should be recorded following agreed-upon standards that permit faster and better exchange among organizations doing complementary work.

The case of Argentina illustrates perfectly the need for standard formats to record human rights violations. When civilian authorities began investigating disappearances, they were confronted with data collected by five different agencies, all using different data elements, making comparisons and cross-checking almost impossible. A remedy may be found in a project supported by IDRC and the Government of the Netherlands and coordinated by Winnipeg teacher and librarian Judith Dueck. Ms Dueck, who gained her human rights experience working with Al-Haq, the West Bank affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists, leads an international task force organized by Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems (HURIDOCS) International, based in Oslo, Norway. The task force, made up of members from the North and South, has developed a system for organizing, recording and reporting large quantities of information on the victims of human rights abuses, using standard, well-defined data elements. Ricardo Cifuentes, a computer specialist in Chile, and member of the task force, designed the corresponding database structure using DBASE 3 software. Further work on facilitating data exchange among different systems is being done by another HURIDOCS task force headed by Jo Jo Tam of Hong Kong.

The system, entitled "Standard Formats: A Tool In the Documentation of Human Rights Violations," will allow large and small organizations involved in human rights and humanitarian concerns to coordinate their efforts and develop databases that could be accessible worldwide. "We basically worked on this by taking the forms used by many human rights organizations and tried to find a consensus," says Ms Dueck.

The new tool allows organizations to record data on human rights violations in five basic categories: the event itself; the victim; sources of information; information on the perpetrator; and intervention information. These five categories are further divided into more detailed subcategories.

"Each organization has its own needs," says Ms Dueck. The task force's document is flexible enough to adapt to these needs. "We've been finding that some organizations are interested in certain categories and not others. Organizations can eliminate the categories they don't need."

The real benefit of standardization is that once a good number of groups adopt the process, data can be
exchangeable, she explains. This collaboration would permit the efficient use of information worldwide on human rights violations and social justice cases.

The format is already being used on a limited basis. Amnesty International, SOS Torture, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and grassroots organizations in Latin America, the Philippines and elsewhere are all testing the formats. With HURIDOCS International's extensive training program, "we are hoping that over the next ten years it will become the standard," says Ms Dueck.

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ISSN 0315-9981. This magazine is listed in the Canadian Magazine Index.

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