

Victim Support Europe Contribution

Research, innovation, education &
young people – a new global approach



About Victim Support Europe

Victim Support Europe (VSE) is the leading European umbrella organisation advocating on behalf of all victims of crime, no matter what the crime, no matter who the victim is. VSE represents 62 member organisations, providing support and information to more than 2 million people affected by crime every year in 30 countries.

Founded in 1990, VSE has been working for 30 years for a Europe, and a world, where all victims have strong victims' rights and services, whether they report the crime or not. We work towards this missing through advocacy to improve European and International laws, through research and knowledge development and through capacity building at the national and local level.

Introduction

VSE welcomes the European Commission's initiative to revise the 2012 international cooperation strategy to reflect current European priorities, global challenges and geo-political considerations. Europe's prosperity and the well-being of its citizens depends on the EU's capacity to develop and implement sustainable responses to social challenges.

Investing in research and innovation is investing in Europe's future. That investment often focuses on medical, environmental, law enforcement issues for example, yet **fails to recognise the significant need and value of research with respect to justice and in particular victims of crime.**

There are five notable areas where victims still face considerable challenges:

- Individuals and communities are **facing ever evolving threats of crime**. Innovations in criminal activity particularly online are exposing ever larger numbers of people to victimisation often for prolonged periods of time, or to a situation where crimes may never be solved. With increasing complexity and cross border elements, not only is prevention and law enforcement action facing considerable challenges but victims also face great difficulties in to receive the practical assistance they need.
- A large proportion of victims **never report the crime or never reach the services they need** because they are not identified as victims or because of barriers to coming forward; victims may not understand they are victims, they may not know their rights, and they may not know how to report a crime.
- For those who report the crime or seek help, **many are subject to secondary victimisation** by a wide variety of actors both inside and outside the justice system, and by society itself – due to lack of knowledge and understanding, lack of protection, poor treatment, and lack of co-ordinated efforts.
- For those who report the crime or seek help **many do not benefit from rights** established in EU law either because the right is not implemented or it is implemented poorly, or they are never informed of their right.

- **Even where assistance is available, it may be outdated or not benefit from the most advanced research and technology** which could greatly improve outcomes for victims.

Research and innovation to resolve these challenges will offer significant individual, social and economic benefits across Europe and Globally.

Not only are their limited research opportunities in the victims' field, priorities also focus on entrepreneurs and academics, **failing to recognise that innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit is at the heart of successful NGO action**, which itself is often critical to social change and the success of democratic societies.

NGOs are in the frontline of tackling wide ranging poverty, inclusion, vulnerability, crime related and social issues. Their **future success is directly linked to their ability to connect with researchers, academics and the private sector** to develop state of the art solutions necessary for the achievement of 21st Century resilient, successful and fulfilled societies. **All three sectors must be supported through innovation and research actions to co-operate in developing coherent, relevant solutions.**

Whilst notable progress in laws and policies on victims' issues have been achieved in the EU over the last decade, success is hampered by **limited implementation of rules**. Much of the progress has been focused on procedural issues rather **than mental health and well-being, technical aspects of service provision or the development of technological solutions to benefit victims and service providers**. Billions have been poured into important fields such as cancer research, yet **access to similar funds for victim recovery and assistance is almost non-existent**.

Not only is advanced research and innovation crucial to progressing the health and welfare needs of hundreds of millions of victims, it is also critical to their ability to access justice and to take part in a safe, effective and efficient system of justice within a state and across borders. This is notably in line with EU President Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines which states that "Europe must lead the transition to a healthy planet and a new digital world." and with the **Commission's focus on digital justice**.

Digital technologies have rapidly become part of our everyday life with a direct impact in all sectors, including the justice system. It is increasingly recognised that **digitalisation and innovation are becoming the main drivers of change in the functioning of justice institutions and service-delivery models**.

The current pandemic has also highlighted the increasing need to use new technologies to connect with each other, in the work environment but also in our private lives. Our justice systems need to adapt, to evolve with changing times. **Emerging technologies have a strong potential to enhance access to justice by creating new avenues and closing gaps to advance integrated, inclusive and people-centred ecosystems.**

Making sure that the voices of victims and witnesses are heard is crucial for a fair and effective justice system, and supporting them should be a central part of the digitalisation of justice. **The digitalisation of justice should improve the victims' experience of the justice system while minimising secondary victimisation and protecting their personal data.**

Innovation and research in the victims' sector is essential in the EU but **perhaps even more critical in developing regions such as in Africa and Asia**. With wide differences in justice and health systems, limitations on the abilities of institutions to reach the hundreds of millions of victims across these continents, and many budgets which simply do not even consider assistance to victims, **innovative approaches to deliver support, protecting individuals, building resilience, spreading awareness and**

training and much more can provide a lifeline to victims to escape the trauma of past crimes and the threat of future ones. Without the global leadership of the EU in such matters, **these issues are often forgotten or ignored**, yet solutions form the cornerstone to rule based, just societies – foundations of the European Union.

Such actions benefit not only nationals of those countries but also EU citizens abroad. Indeed, the EU Victims' Rights Strategy calls on the EU and its Member States to strengthen cooperation between national authorities and support organisations of third countries and consular authorities and support organisations of EU Member States to facilitate access to justice for EU citizens victimised in third countries.

Victims' issues are too often forgotten by the European Union when developing new policies or funding programmes. The first-ever EU Victims' Rights Strategy is a crucial tool for long term planning and proper, co-ordinated implementation of policies across a wide range of sectors whilst ensuring that no victim is forgotten. However, it lacks a significant element around innovation and research.

Victim Support Europe therefore calls for the rethinking the EU global approach to research and innovation to incorporate in its priorities:

- **Justice systems including digitalisation for the benefit victims;**
- **Victimisation issues including mental health and access to high quality innovation services and therapies;**
- **Full recognition of the role of NGOs in innovation and research and the active support for co-operation between NGOs, academia and the private sector.**

In simple terms, this entails the ongoing mainstreaming of victims' issues into all sectors. Victims' mainstreaming in international cooperation can achieve greater good for the whole society and place **the EU as the leader in the promotion and protection of victims' rights.**

In the following sections, VSE gives recommendations for three main sectors where victims' issues should be included:

- One of the objectives of the revised EU Strategy on international cooperation should be the **inclusion of victims' issues as a priority in countering social challenges** at the EU and international level.
- **Mainstreaming victims' issues to achieve the UN SDG Goals:** EU actions to improve victims' rights in law and in practice are fundamental to achieving broader social welfare and economic objectives as set out under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Mainstreaming victims' issues in EU funding programmes:** Only a negligible fraction of the EU's budget is spent on victims' issues which contrasts with the impacts of crime on victims and society.

I. Priorities related to innovation and research for victims of crime

Inclusion of victims' issues in EU research and innovation

Traditionally, EU research and innovation activities have not included victims' priorities. The EU should consider including victims' issues in the Strategy on international cooperation through research and innovation programmes.

The EU must strengthen its ability to bring forward appropriate new legislation and policy innovation, by carrying out extensive research, consultations and evaluations. For example, new approaches to helping victims be identified and to come forward, new systems within criminal proceedings that support victim centric practices in police stations, courts and other institutions, the acceptance of court facility dogs to help victims give best evidence. Research and studies must be carried out to support these innovative solutions.

Not only should the EU focus on new legislation and policies that include victims' issues but it must also ensure the use of new technologies to support the implementation of victims' rights and services. For example, cutting edge technologies developed in other sectors could be adapted to the victim's area. New specific technologies to improve support services, both face to face and at a distance, are also required. The use of virtual and augmented reality can be developed to support victims of crime or be used in training of professionals to better understand the impact of victimisation, PTSD and the consequences of crimes on the population.

The EU is well placed to have a high-level perspective on new and emerging crimes, risks and problems. Often such issues will start to be addressed by a limited number of States early on with others playing catch up. The EU must gather pan-European and global knowledge on key risks and best practices to develop solutions faster and better than Member States acting alone. In doing so, it must actively consider which issues require European solutions through minimum standards and potentially harmonisation of legislation.

Lack of data on victimisation

We deplore the fact that there is a significant lack of victim relevant statistics within the justice sector in particular. For too long the absence of data has been used to argue that no action is necessary. Data are crucial to understand where the gaps are and whether the actions taken are effective or not.

The EU must work with Member States to press for the collection of disaggregated data on victims of crime based on e.g. age, type of crime, residency status, and disability etc. Such data should focus on how rights are implemented and to what extent, whether victims are receiving and able to act on their rights, and what the outcomes and impacts of victim centric actions are. Any disaggregation should not put at risk the rights of victims or fundamental rights to equality and non-discrimination.

The EU should continue to develop its own data through its agencies, such as the Fundamental Rights Agency and Eurostat. Longitudinal studies which look at the impacts of crime on victims are also very important.

National framework for victim support – an investment for the whole society

The EU and its Member States should keep in mind that their efforts to support victims of crime in their recovery is beneficial for the whole society and economy. A national framework for victim support should be promoted and applied in the EU Member States and in other countries globally to better support victims of crime.

The framework developed by VSE¹ shows the role played by various sectors in ensuring victims receive the help they need. The EU should ensure that over the next five years, its empowerment agenda helps these different actors to develop their victim support mechanisms in the EU and abroad through international cooperation and research. Justice systems can be very different from a country to another, cultural differences can be seen in the way victims of crime are treated – however, victims' rights should be equally recognised and applied at the EU and international level to build empowered and resilient societies.

As a starting point, victims and their social network should be assisted. In most situations, individuals are largely resilient and do not need the help of professional organisations. Much can be done to increase resilience within individuals before and after crime, to help them cope better, and reduce the need for external support. The EU should actively support the development of personal resilience actions.

Where victims do need help, they will usually turn first to their social support network – family, friends, colleagues, the local community or any combination of those. It is therefore essential to strengthen a victim's network both in terms of those within the network but also their ability to support the victim. This entails helping them understand the impact of crime, the needs of victims as well as the most appropriate responses to help the victim.

Building greater awareness in society of its role in helping victims and how it can help, can already have an important impact. For example, incorporating victim oriented themes into school education, into private sector training, into community centres and sports clubs can be a direct action to increase knowledge and awareness. The objective is developing a community wide self-resiliency and ability to provide basic, non-harmful assistance to people before professionals arrive at the scene and when helping victims within the social support network. Ultimately, our communities should be informed, resilient and caring about victims and victimisation issues.

In some cases, the network alone will not be sufficient or will not be able to offer certain forms of assistance the victim needs. In other cases, a victim may not have such a supportive network and will need a range of professional help.

Empowerment of civil society and victim support organisations through innovation and research

Civil society contributions have been at the heart of delivering support over the last 35 years. With the adoption of EU laws and with changing attitudes in some Member States, the EU must mitigate the risks of that civil society is excluded from this field including by promoting close cooperation between national authorities and civil society organisations. Research show that victim support is best delivered through NGOs and victims' associations thanks to their flexibility and fast adapting environment.

Research and innovation can also play a critical role in improving the access to and the delivery of support for victims of crime, such as:

- **Developing tools that help connect victims to the services they need**, including through effective referral mechanisms between police and victim support services, improved co-ordination and networking between support organisations, awareness raising campaigns on victims' rights and services, and online support (helplines, chat, emails...)
- **Exploring new psychosocial support techniques and therapies and improving existing ones.** Cutting edge technologies developed in other sectors could be adapted to the victim's area, such as virtual and augmented reality. The development and acceptance of Facility Dogs to support the most vulnerable victims can also be considered and supported at the EU level¹

Victim support organisations and civil society should be empowered to access EU and national funding to develop such innovative practice and take part in the research and collection of data on victimisation in their country.

Need of improvement for cross-border victims

It is recognised that cross border victims in the EU face greater challenges in accessing justice and support, but the challenges are even bigger when the crime happens outside of the EU. The EU should take actions to ensure that European nationals abroad receive support, are able to access justice in the country of crime and access support on their return home.

The EU needs to improve cross border cooperation mechanisms to assist with continued participation in criminal justice proceedings abroad. Embassies can play an important role in supporting victims as they are often the first point of contact of the victim after the crime. The EU should support the better incorporation of victims' issues into the work of foreign offices and embassies, including by developing training on victims' rights, guidance manual on how to communicate with victims, etc.

II. Mainstreaming victims' issues to achieve the UN SDGs / International cooperation

International cooperation should be developed through international institutions and with national governments of third countries to promote EU standards on victims' rights outside the EU. International cooperation is crucial to strengthen victims' rights and services outside of the EU. We believe that the EU should operate as leader in the field of victims at the international level and within the United Nations. Promoting the victims' agenda at the UN level also supports seven of the SDGs developed by the General Assembly and can benefit wide issues such as the rule of law.

The EU should promote a strong response to support and protect victims of crime outside of the EU, in particular in developing countries and countries in conflict, in order to support the establishment of rule of law and democracies. The EU should intensify its co-operation with different parts of the UN such as UNODC, UNICEF, UN Women, as well as with the United Nations Victims' Rights Advocate and the UN Human Rights commissioner to ensure that the needs of specific groups of victims are addressed and that the UN also strengthens its agenda for all victims of crime.

¹ <https://victim-support.eu/news/new-eu-project-facility-dogs-to-support-victims-in-belgium-france-and-italy/>

The EU should work not only with international institutions but also with third country States to support the development of laws, policies and services, including through the funding on capacity building activities which covers all victims of crime.

Ensuring appropriate mainstreaming of victims’ rights policy into all other victims’ related policies is crucial. Many different aspects of the life of the individual will be impacted after a victimisation. It is insufficient to only improve the way in which victims are supported in the justice system, all sectors of life should be addressed such as the health system, the education system, the work place, etc.

Not only is such an approach critical to achieving specific victim objectives, but those same actions are fundamental to achieving broader social welfare and economic objectives as set out under the Sustainable Development Goals. Notably there are at least 7 SDGs which prima facie would benefit from victim focused interventions:

SDGs	Relation to victims’ field
SDG 1 - No poverty	Better recovery improves work and life results. Individuals with low incomes are amongst the most vulnerable to crime and to its impacts
SDG 3 - Health	Addressing the psychological impact of crime on victims (direct and indirect) will improve health outcomes. Direct action on resilience and recovery is relevant for the health of society in general.
SDG 4 - Quality education	Victimisation has a significant impact on education outcomes. Education offers opportunities to address crime and its impacts and should be consider from primary school through to lifelong learning.
SDG 5 - Gender equality	Core aspect of Gender based violence, also individualised responses which reflect gender issues e.g. different needs of female victims in court
SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth	Private sector has a critical role in developing solutions to help victims, including safety in the work place – harassment etc., victim oriented work place (identifying if staff are victims and responding correctly), private sector identifying criminality (e.g. hotels trained to identify trafficking)
SDG 10 - Reduced Inequality	Different impacts of crime on different communities, ensuring inclusive responses
SDG 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions	Formal and informal justice for victims, building communities, improving victim focused institutions

Such mainstreaming will require that each policy area actively considers how victims’ issues should be reflected and explicitly named in policy actions, laws, and funding programmes. To support this, officials working in those fields should receive relevant training to understand better the victims’ field.

III. Mainstreaming victims’ issues in EU funding programmes

Only a negligible fraction of the EU’s budget is spent on victims’ issues. This contrasts with the cost of crime on victims and society. Having in mind the importance and cross cutting nature of victims issues, the European Commission should develop a strategic approach to victims funding that identifies areas most likely to benefit from EU funding and which co-ordinates incorporation of victims’ priorities

across the various EU funding programmes including those operating at the national and international level.

Victim priorities should as a result be explicitly added to funding programmes priorities which will help prevent victimisation, improve victim centric responses of authorities, and develop recovery and support systems. In particular, specific funding should be allocated to support organisations to set up and run 116006 helplines for victims of crime. It should ensure that civil society, research institutions and state actors can all benefit from such funding.

Significant long-term funding is required to develop technological solutions for victims, to improve the way support services are organised and delivered, to carry out longitudinal studies on impacts and benefits of different recovery solutions (e.g. therapies), to improve trauma resiliency in populations and to create tools to improve user experiences of justice systems, etc.

Both direct EU funding, as well as EU funding delivered through others (UN/Council of Europe/ EU collaborations, Norway Grants and other national grants), must incorporate victim priorities. As with direct EU funding, priorities must support actions for all victims as well as specific groups to achieve foundational changes for all.

EU funding for international action must incorporate victims' priorities to support neighbourhood countries and beyond to establish rights, improve justice for victims and ensure support exists and is accessible. Funding should also actively promote cooperation across borders to help EU victims abroad.

EU funding should continue to improve on efficiency of administration to minimise burdens on recipients. Approaches should also minimise the cost burdens on organisations. The higher the contribution requirements on recipients the more difficult it is for civil society organisations to participate. This runs contrary to broader EU priorities to support civil society. Whilst in some funding programmes e.g. H2020, 100% funding is provided, in other programmes – notably Justice – funding is at the 80-90% level. Equally, the level of funding to those programmes should be adapted so that any reductions in contributions does not reduce the number of projects that can be funded. The increases the barriers and challenges for civil society organisations to access large-funded projects

The Commission should develop tools to assist organisations, governments and individuals to identify all EU funded projects focused on victims' issues, to access the results of funding and to make use of those results. A web based interface which enables quick access to information on what projects were funded, their objectives and access to the actual deliverables would be essential. In addition, the Commission should develop its ability to ensure projects deliver high quality results. A move from administrative processing to examining content would be beneficial.