

CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN VoT WG meeting – Creating guidelines for involving victims/survivors in P/CVE
29-30 September 2022, Nice, France*

Involving victims/survivors in P/CVE

Key outcomes

Involving victims/survivors of terrorism in prevention/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work can be extremely valuable. They have a unique perspective as they have directly experienced the consequences of a terror attack. Practitioners who wish to include victims/survivors in their P/CVE approaches might be hesitant to do so out of concern for potentially re-traumatising the victim/survivor or otherwise harming their wellbeing.

On 29 and 30 September victims/survivors of terrorism, representatives of victim organisations, and other P/CVE practitioners who are already working with victims/survivors or wishing to do so, gathered in Nice (France) to discuss how to respectfully and safely include victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE. Four core topics were discussed in relation to involving victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE efforts. Firstly, the value of their testimonials in P/CVE approaches were explored. Secondly, the role of victims/survivors of terrorism in restorative justice efforts and in building social cohesion was discussed. Thirdly, the importance of cooperation with media (with a P/CVE aim) was explored. Finally, empowering young victims/survivors was highlighted.

The following key messages and recommendations were formulated:

The value of testimonials:

- Using testimonials (with a P/CVE aim) requires a **match between the sender and the receiver** in order to have the greatest impact.
- A 'perfect' testimonial should be a convincing story that shows **vulnerability and strength**.
- The message should be **simple and memorable** so it can be easily understood and retained by the audience.

Restorative justice and social cohesion:

- **Information on access to (restorative) justice** is vital for victims/survivors. At the moment, offenders have better access to restorative justice efforts than victims/survivors.
- Personal and collective restorative justice cannot be separated if its P/CVE aim is to be effective. There should be space to **find multiple 'truths'**.
- There is a need for more **awareness-raising** in society and with (victimised) communities about what restorative justice is, and how it can be used as a tool to promote P/CVE. It is important to prevent victims/survivors involved in restorative justice efforts to feel stigmatised over 'talking with the enemy'.
- The healing of victims/survivors is linked to the healing of society. After an attack, society also experiences a trauma. Therefore, victims/survivors can **act as agents in healing a society**.

Cooperation with media (with a P/CVE aim):

- There should be a **synergy between government and media communication**. Both need to follow a similar strategic communication plan.

- Victim organisations need to be **proactive**, particularly in the immediate aftermath of an attack.
- Society benefits from **hearing the real stories of victims/survivors**, as this can contribute to the healing of society as a whole and serve as a preventative measure.

Empowering young victims/survivors:

- **Many terrorist attacks target young people**, and they are often affected by these attacks (losing parents or siblings). Despite this, young people are underrepresented in media and other communication surrounding such attacks.
- The **stories of young victims/survivors** can have a strong impact on certain target groups (such as school children).
- However, **young victims/survivors are particularly vulnerable** and require extensive support than adult victims/survivors, especially in shaping their identity outside of being a victim/survivor.

This conclusion paper gathers the most important outcomes of the meeting, structured per discussion topic. Additionally, an ad hoc paper will be drafted based on these recommendations and additional research.

Highlights of the discussion

The central question of this meeting was how to ensure the wellbeing and mental health of victims/survivors when involving them in P/CVE efforts. This should always be kept in mind when working with victims/survivors. P/CVE work can be challenging for any person (professional or not), and this target group is particularly vulnerable. Therefore, the question of their wellbeing should be inextricably linked to any discussion about their involvement in P/CVE.

Additionally, it is important to be aware of the level of expertise of a victim/survivor in the P/CVE field. Being a victim/survivor does not immediately mean being a P/CVE expert or expert on victim/survivor rights. Some victims/survivors do become experts. However, expert or not, their involvement can always be valuable. Nevertheless, when and how to involve them should depend on whether they are experts on the topic or not.

Not all victims/survivors may wish to participate in P/CVE and their decision should be respected. For those who choose to be involved and wish to develop expertise in victim's rights and/or P/CVE, support should be provided. It is important to ensure that these individuals are not publicly 'outed' as victims/survivors, and that their participation does not negatively impact their own healing process.

Recommendations and key messages

The value of testimonials

- A **'perfect' testimonial** should meet certain requirements. The most impressive testimonials include or demonstrate the following:
 - convincing and **authentic story** with a twist;
 - **emotional impact** (the speaker shows vulnerability but projects strength);
 - show what **consequences** the attack has had for the speaker;
 - disseminate a **positive message** (not only with regard to overcoming hardship, but also for society as a whole);
 - present a core message that is **simple and memorable**;
 - reject a culture of violence and **promote a culture of solidarity**.
- When using testimonials (with a P/CVE aim), there needs to be a **match between the sender and the receiver** in order for the testimonial to have impact. This match can exist at one or more different levels in terms of age, social and cultural characteristics, gender, or even the type of trauma suffered.
- In order for testimonials to be **effective**, those giving testimonials should...
 - be aware of the **objective** of sharing their testimonial;
 - be aware and critical of their own **motives** for wanting to share their story;
 - be sufficiently **emotionally** stable to share their story publicly and to engage with an audience;

- be aware of the **possible effects** sharing their testimonial can have on them.
- The role of those inviting victims/survivors to share their testimonial, and those supporting them – such as victim organisations – is crucial. They should ensure that:
 - the **timing** suits the needs and wellbeing of the victim/survivor;
 - the victim/survivor is actually **ready** to give a testimonial at this period of time and also at the particular moment of the event. It should be clear to the speaker that pulling out at any moment is allowed;
 - the speaker is **well prepared** and their expectations are realistic;
 - the **risks** connected to giving the testimonial is clear to all involved.
- There are some potential **risks and challenges** associated with victims/survivors giving testimonials:
 - The **truthfulness** of the testimonial. It is crucial and requires factchecking beforehand. While victims/survivors should be trusted, sharing a partially untrue testimonial can be damaging for themselves and other victims/survivors.
 - Sharing graphic images or too many details of the attack can be harmful to both the audience and other victims/survivors. It also serves to spread fear, which **plays into the hands of the perpetrator**. Both the speaker and the supporting organisation have a responsibility to ensure that the testimonial does not have negative consequences.
 - It is understandable for victims/survivors to feel or have felt **negative emotions** such as anger, blame or desire for retribution. These negative emotions can be shared in a testimonial. However, the extent to which these negative emotions are shared should be limited and the negative message should not be at the core of the testimonial.
 - Sharing a testimonial is extremely personal and vulnerable experience. The speaker should be prepared for the possibility of **neutral or even negative audience**. If this does happen, they should be well supported by the host of the event.
- Testimonials can be a **powerful tool in P/CVE** because they serve one or more of the following objectives:
 - **remembrance** and transmission of memories;
 - soliciting **empathy**;
 - **rehumanising** the ‘numbers’ in the news by putting a face to faceless and nameless victims/survivors;
 - showing that **anybody could become a victim/survivor** of terrorism;
 - promoting the **rejection of a culture of violence**.
- For testimonials to have a true impact, they should be **integrated into a broader approach**. To fully grasp the events and put it into perspective, the audience should have the time to prepare beforehand and to process the topic afterwards.
- Testimonials can be shared within **different settings**, and can have positive and negative consequences:
 - **Face-to-face testimonials** in a small setting allows for personal exchange with the audience and is particularly effective with younger people. However, the message of the testimonial reaches only a limited number of people.
 - Testimonials included in **social media messages or documentaries** can reach a larger audience and can therefore have a greater impact on society. However, this approach does limit the ability to tailor the message to the specific audience, and there is no opportunity for the audience to interact with the speaker and their story.
- The **objective and message** of a testimonial can evolve over time and can also be influenced by the context in which an attack took place. Immediately following an attack, it may be too early to promote a message of reconciliation. However, it is important to encourage non-retaliation as soon as possible.

Restorative justice and social cohesion

- **Access to (information on) restorative justice** is vital for victims/survivors. At the moment, offenders have greater access to restorative justice efforts than victims/survivors.
- Personal and collective restorative justice should not be separated from its P/CVE goals. It is essential to create a space where **multiple ‘truths’** can be explored.
- There is a need for greater **awareness** in society, particularly with (victimised) communities, about what restorative justice is. This is essential to prevent victims/survivors involved in restorative justice efforts from becoming stigmatised over ‘talking with the enemy’.
- To **prepare a society for restorative justice efforts in relation to terror attacks**, it could be beneficial to introduce restorative justice in cases of smaller crimes.
- The healing of victims/survivors is interconnected with the healing of society as a whole. When a terrorist attack occurs, it can traumatise society. Victims/survivors can **serve as agents in healing a society** and play a leading role in restoring what was damaged by the attack. This can set an example for the rest of society and show that the responsibility to address and resolve the conflict lies with society as a whole.

- Restorative justice efforts involving victims/survivors, perpetrators and radicalised individuals, such as through discussion groups in prison or direct dialogue between a victim/survivor and the perpetrator of the attack, can directly **contribute to P/CVE as it helps humanise victims/survivors**.
- Everyone involved in a restorative justice initiative needs to be **aware of the rules and agree** on these beforehand. For example, if cooperating in a restorative justice approach can positively affect an offender's sentence, the victim/survivor needs to be aware of this because it could influence their decision to cooperate or not.
- Everyone involved, particularly the victim/survivor, needs to be well prepared and their **expectations managed**. If they believe success is when the perpetrator repents, they might be seriously disappointed if this does not happen. Preparations need to include conversations with a professional who can prepare them for this and steer them away from placing too much power in the hands of the perpetrator. Vice versa, the perpetrator should not expect forgiveness.
- Not only those directly involved but also **society as a whole needs to be informed** on the how and why of a specific restorative justice effort. Often there is suspicion in society when it comes to such efforts: Are the perpetrators sincere? What is their ulterior motive?
- Restorative justice with former perpetrators (who completed their prison sentence) can feel **more impactful** than approaches in prisons. Just like in prison, the former perpetrator needs to schedule time out of their day to participate.
- In many Member States where restorative justice is not a solidified approach yet, there are challenges in relation to incorporating restorative justice efforts into the criminal justice system. At the moment, restorative justice is not an official part of court cases in most Member States. Also, restorative justice efforts are being executed by NGOs and CSOs such as victim organisations and peace and reconciliation groups. Institutional and legal **adjustments need to be made**.
- **The amount of time that has passed** since the attack is important. The more time passes, the higher the chances that both victim/survivor and perpetrator are capable and willing to take part in a restorative justice effort.
- Whether or not restorative justice is needed is **highly personal**. In some cases a direct conversation with the perpetrator might be the only intervention that is necessary. In other cases, victims/survivors might have greater need for a criminal court case and/or compensation (financial). There needs to be space to explore different options. However, both punitive and restorative actions are typically necessary for the healing process of an individual victim/survivor and society as a whole. As such, focusing solely on punitive consequences could negatively affect social cohesion.
- In cases of a more long-term conflict, **truth commissions can be beneficial for the healing of society**, as they might encourage reconciliation. However, this is only the case if their goal is clear and all parties involved can come to an agreement when it comes to issues such as amnesty.

Cooperation with media (with a P/CVE aim)

- The faster government, media and victim organisations respond in a carefully planned manner in the aftermath of an attack, the easier it is to **shape the narrative** surrounding an attack and diminish fear. Part of this narrative needs to be the promotion of community belonging and the aim to give meaning to an event.
- There should be a **synergy between government and media communication**. It is necessary for both to follow a similar strategic communication plan. It is recommended that this plan is established before any attack has taken place, so it can be implemented immediately in the event of an attack.
- Victims/survivors should be at the heart of this strategic communication plan. Victims/survivors of former attacks can feed into it and the plan should centre around the wellbeing of (new) victims/survivors. This way, society's response will be targeted in such a way as to contribute to social cohesion.
- A **paradigm shift** is necessary, from focusing on the perpetrator to focusing on the victim/survivor. Is it possible for the media to share parallel narratives from both the victims/survivors and perpetrators?
- An **inspiring example** of a victim-centred and well-coordinated response was the (government) response after the Christchurch attack in New Zealand. Prime minister Ardern immediately identified herself with the victims/survivors, which was particularly crucial because the Muslim community was targeted in this attack, which involved religious leaders. Additionally, she did not mention the name of the perpetrator, focused on social cohesion and referred to the victims/survivors as 'shuhada' (martyrs), as this is how the community itself referred to them.
- Victim organisations need to be **proactive** instead of reactive, especially right after an attack. This way they can influence how the media (and society) respond. They can also protect vulnerable victims/survivors and can give a voice to the victims/survivors who are willing and able to share their story about the attack in question or an earlier one.

- Society benefits from **hearing the real stories of victims/survivors**. This can contribute to the healing of society as a whole. This, in turn, is a preventative measure as it prevents new grievances being created.
- There needs to be **diversity in the stories** shared, both in terms of the background of the victims/survivors themselves as well as the ideologies to which they had fallen victim. This helps prevent stigmatisation and polarisation.
- Professionals with experience in working with victims/survivors should **engage with journalists** who report on violent extremism and terror attacks. This way it is possible to:
 - build awareness around media bias;
 - encourage journalists to focus on moderate voices;
 - ensure journalists take a trauma-sensitive approach;
 - enable professionals to build a partnership with media outlets, supporting inclusive reporting;
 - raise political awareness to support victims/survivors.
- With regard to **social media** it's very complicated to manage and influence the narrative and what is being shared online. There are several aspects that can positively influence (the impact of) what is being shared online.
 - Social media companies, under the umbrella of the EU Internet Forum, should be informed on what content is harmful for victims/survivors and be encouraged to moderate their platforms accordingly.
 - Media literacy and critical thinking skills need to be incorporated into school curricula on a large scale. Firstly, this will help prevent the spread of harmful and/or extremist content. Secondly, it can contribute to making individuals more resilient when encountering such content.
- Media should be invited to reflect on (either their own or other's) reporting on previous attacks. For example, an **evaluation of the reporting** of the Columbine school shooting (where many details of the attack and about the perpetrator were shared as well as the ideology behind the attack) 'inspired' copycats to do the same.
- Although more victim-centred reporting is necessary, there needs to be space to reflect on (repenting) perpetrators as well. There is a responsibility with media to also show that **it is possible for people to change**.

Empowering young victims/survivors

- **Many attacks target young people**, and young people are often affected by attacks (mourning the loss of parents or siblings). Nevertheless, they are often underrepresented in the media and other communication surrounding the attacks.
- Successful approaches that are aimed at young people are based on the **creation of a peer community**, without singling out the 'victim/survivor' part of the youngsters' identity as their core. Such approaches include organised activities and camps, either for the whole family or only the youth.
- The **stories of young victims/survivors** might resonate better with certain target groups (such as school children).
- In addition, as youth often represents innocence, their stories and work in P/CVE might be widely **perceived as more genuine** and can contribute to the creation of hope in society.
- However, **young victims/survivors are more vulnerable** and need more extensive support than adult victims/survivors.
- Particularly with youth who share a testimonial, they are at high risk of **being exploited**, as they are often expected to share their story for free. They are free to do this without remuneration but should also be able to ask compensation for their (emotional) work.
- Young victims/survivors should receive support when it comes to **shaping their identity**, learning that being a victim/survivor is not their only quality. In addition, when they wish to become involved in P/CVE they also need to decide on how they wish to portray themselves. Will they remain solely a victim/survivor or do they wish to become an expert?
- Especially in the case of underage victims/survivors, media might be hesitant to share their stories, and rightly so. However, this should not lead to the **underrepresentation of young victims/survivors** who do wish to share their story. The legal guardians, caretakers and/or members of victim organisations can support the young victim/survivor to make their story heard.
- Overall, improvements need to be made when it comes to:
 - Guidance and emotional support when youth are considering becoming involved in P/CVE;
 - Objective assessment of who is suitable to be involved in P/CVE;
 - Risk management and preparation according to these potential risks.
- In recent years, the pandemic made it more difficult to meet face to face with impacted youth. This practice needs to be picked up again, as **face-to-face interventions** in this case have a significant added value over online contact.

- Since youth spend a lot of time online, it is nearly **impossible to shield them from harmful or extremist content**, either from the attack that affected (victimized) them, or other attacks and ideologies. Therefore, it is crucial to build their emotional resilience and digital skills.

Relevant practices

On 23 November 2022, the [Finn Nørgaard Association](#), in collaboration with the Danish Association of Journalists, held a seminar in Copenhagen. Its aim was to provide media with ethical guidelines, which is an important topic of discussion in Danish society. The panel consisted of media and communication experts and victims/survivors from all over Europe. The panel concluded that it is necessary to rethink the media's role with regard to reporting on terror attacks, in order to report in a constructive manner, without doing harm to victims/survivors and society as a whole. The seminar will lead to a report that will be delivered to relevant decision-makers, such as media, policymakers, etc.

The [Omagh Support & Self Help Group](#) (OSSHG) was founded in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing in August 1998 to act as a source of support for those affected.

The Spanish Fundación Fernando Buesa Blanco is a non-profit organisation. Its goal is to keep alive the memory of Fernando Buesa (assassinated by ETA) in terms of supporting the culture of peace, democracy and social progress alive. One of their practices is the [Concordia Bloggers game](#), in which young people engage in real-life situations, where they are invited to think critically about their own convictions.

[The Association of Aid for the Victims of 11 March](#) (Spain) is a non-profit organisation founded after the Atocha attacks (2004). The group aims to support and advise victims/survivors of this attack and create societal awareness of the impact of terrorist attacks.

Follow up

All four topics deserve continuous attention, as insights on how to involve victims/survivors safely and respectfully in P/CVE might change over time. In the short term, the following questions and issues should be addressed:

- How do individualistic and collectivist societies view restorative justice differently and what is the best way to incorporate this in the **different types of societies**?
- Should **victim-only approaches** be viewed as part of restorative justice efforts? Is it necessary to involve perpetrators?
- Instead of focusing on digital literacy it could be beneficial to aim to build **emotional resilience**. This helps individuals better address the harmful or extremist content they might encounter online. It also limits the impact of (social) media on daily life.
- Is it possible for victims/survivors to **cooperate with media with a P/CVE aim** when their own governments do not properly support them and their work?
- **Mental health issues** and suicide rates among young victims/survivors are worthy of further exploration.