



GUIDELINES

for Victim Participation in Justice Processes

Summary

February 2025



Summary

The International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses (INOVAS) welcomes greater awareness of the importance of meaningful victim participation in transitional justice processes. However, it is our experience that even when there are good intentions to fully involve us, we victims and survivors often feel excluded from key policy discussions, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.

Therefore, we as INOVAS members have pooled our knowledge and experience, and produced a set of practical guidelines for any individuals or entities working with formal or informal justice processes. The following is an abridged version of the guidelines. More detailed information on our principles, definitions and methodology can be found in the full guidelines document.

1. Recognise victims' agency

Victims should be involved at every stage, from start to finish, of a justice process, and participation should be considered as a co-creative effort designed to genuinely empower victims and value our engagement. Victims' input should be taken on board and have material influence in shaping processes, mechanisms and outcomes. We should be represented on key committees and be appointed as facilitators, staff and advisers.

“If you try and think for survivors rather than getting their input at the design stage, it will be too late to make the process successful when you implement [it].”

A survivor from Kenya.

2. Respect victims' choices and boundaries

All forms of participation must be voluntary and based on fully informed and freely given consent. Respect the wishes of survivors, who may not wish to engage directly with justice mechanisms.

“Some victims are content with knowledge without involvement.”

A survivor from Syria.

3. Build knowledge and respect victims' space and autonomy

We victims are more likely to achieve our aims if we are able to prepare, organise, decide priorities, and work collectively. Processes should be as local as possible. Organising as autonomous actors is empowering in itself. Survivors must understand decision-making processes and develop the skills to express ourselves effectively.

“How can you sit with policymakers if you are not educated and come from a position of vulnerability?”

A survivor from Kenya.

4. Understand victims' identities and diversity

Do not assume all victims want the same thing, we have likely suffered different types of harm. Ensure all community members, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, literacy, socio-economic status, political affiliation or involvement in the conflict, have the opportunity to participate equally. Take advice from survivors on handling these complex issues.

“Victims' concerns tend to be very local and personal, and affected by social stigmas and livelihood concerns.”

A survivor from Nepal.

5. Take a gender-sensitive approach

Take into account the multiple ways in which gender affects victimisation and participation. Consider taking different measures to ensure participation among girls, women, boys, and men. Address challenges to participation, such as childcare and transport. Ensure participation is genuinely valued and not tokenistic.

“Women should be at the forefront, but this needs resources to make it happen.”

A survivor from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

6. Be aware of the wider context of victimisation

Participation in justice processes is often just one aspect of a desire to address wider issues, such as discrimination, marginalisation, and political oppression, which may have led to victimisation in the first place. Understand how we victims and survivors perceive the harm done to us and our various goals, expectations and priorities. Use this knowledge to inform the justice mechanisms to be adopted.

“In... forming an organisation to increase women’s participation... we realised we needed to reach out to wider communities and build community healing and reconciliation.”

A survivor from The Gambia.

7. Allow victims to speak for themselves

Do not treat victims as passive beneficiaries. Civil society organisations and others provide vital support but they must never try to speak for victims or undermine our agency. Ensure any staff engaging with victims are appropriately trained, including in dealing with trauma, data protection and active listening. Give survivors space in private and public spheres and allow us to shape agendas.

“NGOs backed by donors are disempowering victims, sidelining and misrepresenting their voices: they are occupying the victims’ space.”

A survivor from Nepal.

8. Communicate regularly and transparently in ways that will reach all victims

Design communications strategies to reach all victims, including using languages and channels that will be intelligible to, and actually reach, victims. Communications should be two-way, so all victims can easily seek out clarifications, further information and provide input. While media and technology can be useful, consider survivors in inaccessible areas who may lack internet access and smart phones.

“In order to enable all victims to participate, resources and strong information campaigns are needed.”

A survivor from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

9. Do no harm: Identify and address risks victims face by participating

Participation can cause mental, physical and social harm. Always carry out thorough risk assessments and put in place measures, including anonymity and appropriate support, to protect victims’ physical and psychological well-being. Modes of participation should be designed to avoid exposure, re-traumatisation, and stigmatisation. Victims should not be asked to recount their story multiple times, if at all avoidable.

“It’s hard to take action when you feel threatened and surrounded by your enemies.”

A survivor from Guatemala

INOVAS
International Network of Victims
& Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses

With support from



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands