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CAPABLE
Building local expertise to tackle drug-related issues

CAPABLE – Strengthening local responses to youth involvement in drug markets

European Crime Prevention Conference

30 September 2026

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European Forum for Urban Security

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European Harm Reduction Network

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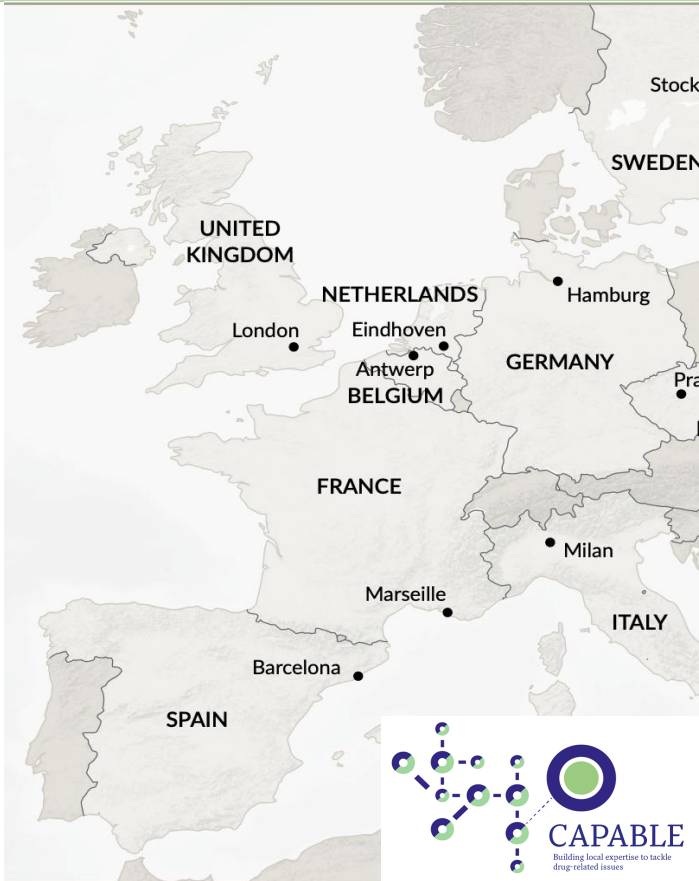
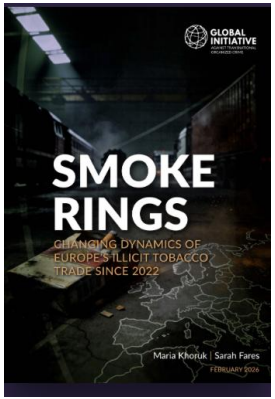
Intro: GI-TOC's EUR-OBS

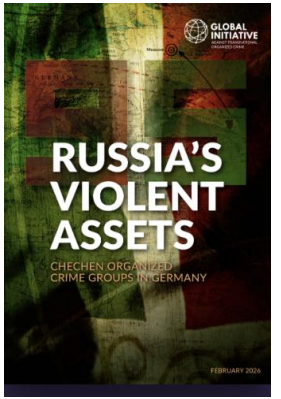
- Launched in April 2024, managed from Berlin, staff across Europe
- Current focus areas: Drugs & arms trafficking, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, call centres, illicit tobacco
- Current projects include *Countering Ethnic Organized Crime in Phygital Spaces* (EU); *Cooperation and Partnership for Building Local Expertise on Drug-related Challenges* (EU); *Monitoring organize crime developments worldwide* (Netherlands), *Mapping drug trafficking flows* (France); *Strengthening Local Responses to Youth Involvement in Drug Markets* (EU)



Intro: GI-TOC's EUR-OBS

- Flagship research: European Drug Trends Monitor and European Arms Monitor
- Key task: Linking Europe developments with organized crime dynamics in other world regions and the GI's system of regional observatories
- Strong Europe presence in the GI's Global Network of Experts – well established network and engagement opportunities





CAPABLE Expected results

Objectives	Outputs	Impacts
Equip frontline actors to better respond to drug related violence and other harms among young people	Needs analysis in 16 European cities in terms of training on drug-related violence and harms Development of 1 modular and adaptable training Delivery of the training to 48 people in 4 different cities of 4 European countries	Enhance competencies of trainees, improve their practical skills to better respond to DVH among young people Multiple the number of trainers in Europeans cities thanks to the “train the trainers” methodology (medium term)
Develop an integrated training content on drug-related violence and other harm focusing on the vulnerable youth promoting a balanced approach combining prevention, risk and harm reduction, and security considerations.	Development of 1 modular hybrid and adaptable training	Improve effectiveness and coherence of local responses to drug-related violence and other harms among vulnerable young people through balanced, evidence-based and cross-sectoral approaches

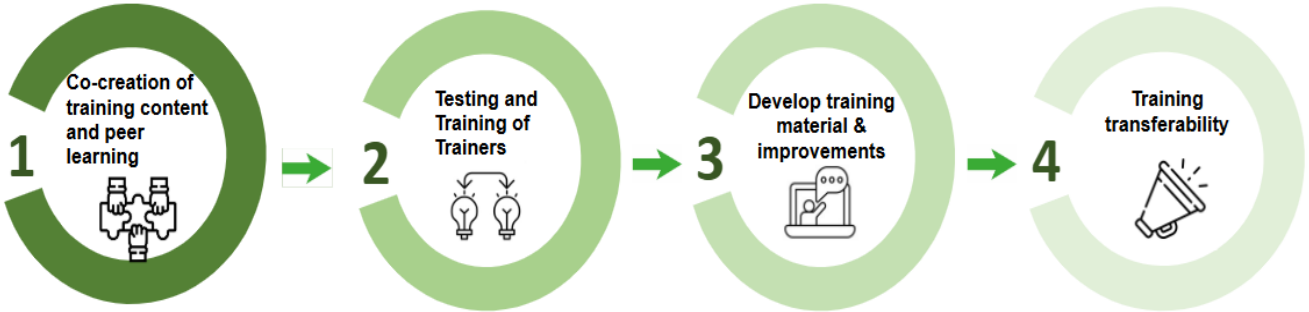
CAPABLE Expected results

Objectives	Outputs	Impacts
Develop a transferable and self-usable training material developed on drug-related violence and other harms	Development of transferable training material (guidebooks, interviews, podcasts)	Development of transferable training material (guidebooks, interviews, podcasts)
Reinforce multi-stakeholders collaboration in cities	Development of trainee selection criterias to ensure diversity of professionals in cities	More effective and sustainable responses to drug-related violence and other harms affecting young people at city level, driven by integrated multi-stakeholder approaches.

Project Overview

Four-step development

- **Conceptualisation and training design**: co-production through desk-research, hybrid co-creation workshops, and training material review by associated cities
- **Development of the training material**: adaptable to different local contexts and self-usable by local stakeholders
- **Delivery of the hybrid training sessions** through online sessions and tailored in-person workshops
- **Awareness and advocacy activities** to promote the needs and core issues of the projects' topics and the need of fostering local stakeholders training



NEEDS IDENTIFICATION AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS
Preliminary findings

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Youth involvement in European drug markets: an evolving urban challenge

- **Young people are becoming an increasingly visible part of Europe's drug-market workforce**, with recruitment extending from low-level dealing to increasingly violent and specialized tasks.
- **Younger recruits, more diverse roles:** minors are used for drug distribution, surveillance, extraction of cocaine from ports, weapons carrying and violent assignments.
- **Recruitment is both physical and digital:** schools, neighbourhoods and peer groups coexist with platforms such as Snapchat and other online channels.
- **Victim and offender categories increasingly overlap:** young people may be simultaneously exploited by criminal networks, involved in drug use and active in supply.
- **Urban spaces are directly affected:** schools, parks, squares, youth facilities and transport hubs increasingly become points of recruitment, dealing or exposure to drug-market activity.
- **Long-term consequences:** exposure to violence, criminal justice involvement and exclusion from education and employment can reinforce pathways into more serious organized crime.

Youth involvement in European drug markets: an evolving urban challenge

- **Illustrative cases:**
  BE Belgium — **13-year-olds** guarding/extracting cocaine in the port
  NL Netherlands — **15-year-olds** used to plant explosives
  FR France — teenage recruitment for contract violence
  SE Sweden — children **as young as 10** recruited into criminal networks

- **Bottom line:** *Youth involvement is no longer only a social or policing issue — it is an increasingly important component of how European drug markets operate.*

The frontline capacity gap: what CAPABLE is finding

CAPABLE's preliminary research points to **three interconnected weaknesses in local responses**:

- **1. Too late to intervene**
  Limited early-warning mechanisms and unclear indicators mean practitioners often encounter young people **only after arrest, crisis or institutional contact**. The **18–25 age group** is a particular gap between youth and adult frameworks.

- **2. Knowledge and capability gaps**
  Limited data and information-sharing contribute to **"gut-feeling governance"**, while practitioners report gaps in understanding changing drug markets, recruitment mechanisms, engagement with at-risk youth and exit/desistance pathways.

- **3. Fragmented multi-agency responses**
  Police, schools, social services, health professionals, municipalities and civil society are all involved, but cooperation often depends on **informal relationships rather than structured systems**, compounded by legal uncertainty and different institutional mandates.

The frontline capacity gap: what CAPABLE is finding

- **60%** of surveyed practitioners in **Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Austria** reported receiving **no specific recent training on youth involvement in drug supply**.
- **CAPABLE response** → targeted training and practical tools to strengthen **early identification, frontline knowledge and multi-agency coordination**.

A growing challenge, but training has not kept pace

- **Practitioners perceive youth involvement in drug markets as an intensifying challenge across European cities.**
- **57%** of practitioners across the training countries report an **increase in youth involvement in drug markets over the past 3–5 years**.
- At the same time, frontline professionals identify clear gaps between the challenges they face and their current capacity to respond.

- **Top training priorities**
- **65% — Early detection & intervention**
  Recognizing vulnerability and recruitment before situations escalate.
- **58% — Multi-agency cooperation**
  Improving coordination across police, social services, schools, health and municipalities.
- **49% — Protection of vulnerable groups**
  Responding to young people whose involvement combines vulnerability, exploitation and offending.

CAPABLE training therefore needs to address three dimensions:
UNDERSTAND the changing environment → **DEVELOP** frontline skills → **APPLY** practical tools

What practitioners need to understand

- Practitioners need a clearer picture of **how young people enter, move through and exit drug markets.**
- **RECRUITMENT**
  How recruitment works, how roles evolve — from lookouts and couriers to distributors — and how **social media, messaging apps, gaming and gamification** shape recruitment.
- **VULNERABILITY**
  How **family instability, social exclusion, economic vulnerability, peers, mental health and school disengagement**interact to increase risk.
- **CHANGING DRUG MARKETS**
  How youth involvement connects with **organized crime, flexible criminal networks, crime-as-a-service and increasingly digital drug markets**, including platforms such as Telegram.
- **TRAJECTORIES & EXIT**
  How young people progress through criminal networks, when they become receptive to change, and which interventions can support **exit and desistance**.
- **VICTIM ↔ OFFENDER**
  How to respond when exploitation, agency and economic participation coexist in the same young person.
- **SYSTEMS & RESPONSIBILITIES**
  Who can intervene, what information can be shared, and how to address the particular gap affecting **18–25-year-olds**.

What practitioners need to be able to do

The strongest demand is for **practical skills that translate knowledge into earlier and more coordinated intervention.**

- **Detect earlier**
  Recognize warning signs, assess different levels of risk and intervene **before crisis or arrest** — particularly important for teachers, youth workers, coaches and other frontline actors.
- **Engage effectively**
  Build trust through **non-judgmental communication, de-escalation and relationship-building**, including engagement with families and wider social networks.
- **Use turning points**
  Treat moments such as **arrest or justice contact as opportunities for intervention**, linking young people rapidly with welfare and support services.
- **Bridge online → offline**
  Translate digital recruitment signals into real-world intervention by combining the capabilities of **law enforcement and welfare professionals**.
- **Share information confidently**
  Move from uncertainty and risk aversion towards consistent application of **GDPR, confidentiality and information-sharing frameworks**.
- **Build a shared professional language**
  Enable police, educators, health professionals, social workers and municipalities to work across different **mandates, cultures and objectives**.

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