

***Insights
for the Future
of the European Solidarity Corps***

Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

This is an executive summary of a research titled “Exploration of Needs and Trends in European Solidarity Corps Volunteering Activities” carried out in 2023 as a part of the Strategic National Agencies’ Cooperation on Volunteering.

European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme, (2018–) is a unique European funding programme, emphasising solidarity and encompassing a broad spectrum of activities and initiatives. The centrality of solidarity translates into addressing and offering solutions to societal needs.

Nevertheless, the questions about the appeal and relevance of these volunteering models to today’s youth and civic society remain. Hence, a thorough assessment of the responsiveness of the European Solidarity Corps programme to the changing social landscape and its capacity for further evolution to meet future needs was necessary. The specific aims of the research were:

1. Programme analysis and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in regard to organisational support.
2. Programme improvement looking into the volunteering experience and young people’s interests.
3. Understanding the main obstacles, opportunities and success factors in the current programme, with a specific focus on volunteering activities.

The aim of this executive summary is to answer these questions, summarising both key qualitative and quantitative findings.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Quantitative data was collected through three surveys:

- Two main surveys – one targeting current and former volunteers (n=274) and another aimed at organisational representatives (n=243).
- A brief survey for young people (n=73) distributed via European Solidarity Corps's social media channels.

A diverse array of organisations took part in the survey, with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) forming the largest group (64%). The majority (78%) of organisations have existed for more than 10 years. Geographically, responses are distributed across Europe, with strong representation from Belgium, Finland, and France.

The organisations' key focus areas included youth work (80%), education (57%), and youth information (42%). Organisations receive volunteers from diverse provenance, with a focus on international volunteers from both within and outside the EU/Schengen area. National volunteers are less frequently involved.

The young respondents' current residence spanned across Europe, with concentrations in Finland (15%), Germany (9%), and Belgium (8%). Regarding country of origin, Germany (12%), Slovenia, and Spain (each 8%) are well-represented, alongside a variety of other countries. A majority (53%) were under 25 years old, second largest (32%) age group being those aged 25–30 years. Gender identity among respondents was predominantly female (70%), with males representing 22%, and a smaller percentage identifying as non-binary (4%) or preferring not to disclose (3%). 7% of respondents report having a disability.

The brief survey distributed through social media and targeted at young people without prior experience with the Solidarity Corps did not gather information about the respondents' background.

Motivations to volunteer match its benefits, but recognition needs re-thinking

The ESC programme is seen by volunteers as a dual pathway for personal development and social impact: their primary motivations include gaining new skills (68%) and contributing to meaningful causes (59%).

The same respondent group lists interpersonal and social development (78%), language skills (74%), and planning and organising skills (74%) as the key skills they gained through volunteering.

The findings imply that the programme is a valuable experience in the eyes of young individuals, contributing to heightened employability and personal growth.

Among those without prior experience with the ESC, there is strong interest in joining the ESC (92%). Their motivations align with those of current/former volunteers. The survey also reveals a strong belief in the value of volunteering for competence development relevant to the labour market, with an average agreement level of 85%.

Both young people with and without volunteering experience express and an interest in formal or official recognition of volunteering experiences. This suggests that while acknowledgments like certificates or Youthpasses are valued, there's openness to alternative and formal forms of recognition.



Programme values: solidarity appeals, inclusiveness and eco-friendliness need more attention

Organisations' motivations are led by a commitment to social impact (92%), youth empowerment (87%), and intercultural exchange (88%). Core values like solidarity and inclusion are central to their missions, with 83% and 82% of organisations, respectively, reflecting these values in their activities.

Current/former volunteers rate the principle of solidarity equally highly (4.6 out of 5 in importance¹) but feel its actual presence in their experience is slightly lower (3.9). Specific aspects like empathy and inclusion are emphasised.

Young respondents with no prior experience view solidarity as closely tied to help, community, and empathy, and rate it as important (4.15 out of 5). This conceptual understanding of solidarity aligns well with the ESC's mission, suggesting that the programme's values resonate with potential new participants.

According to current/former volunteers, the inclusiveness of volunteering activities for disadvantaged groups, including young people with fewer opportunities, shows room for improvement, with 50% of respondents rating activities as moderately inclusive and a combined 24% viewing them as somewhat inclusive or not inclusive at all.

Environmental actions such as recycling and promoting sustainable practices are common within volunteering activities. However, only 53% of organisations embed green practices consistently across projects, suggesting a gap between environmental awareness and practical application in projects. This could be an area where ESC activities align more closely with the values of more environmentally conscious young volunteers.

¹ A scale of 1 to 5 was used to measure the importance/presence of solidarity. The scale was defined as follows: 1 - "Not Important/Present at All", 2 - "Slightly Important/Present", 3 - "Moderately Important/Present", 4 - "Important/Present" and 5 - "Very Important/Present".

Information and outreach strategies could benefit from more targeted digital outreach

When asked about their recruitment strategies for volunteers, organisations name the long-lasting partnerships (75%) and the European Youth Portal (72%) as primary channels, with social media (52%) also playing a crucial role. Networking events (34%) and other methods (11%) garner less attention to engage potential volunteers.

Current/former volunteers and non-volunteers differ significantly in their preferred information channels. Non-volunteers rely on social media and digital platforms, with 74% discovering opportunities through social media and 54% through the internet, compared to only 37% of current/former volunteers who lean more on personal networks.

Additionally, only 59% of non-volunteers feel well-informed about volunteering opportunities, highlighting an information gap. This suggests that more targeted digital outreach, particularly through social media, could be an effective way to attract new participants.

Related to the access to information, respondents identified areas for improvement the programme-related websites, suggesting need for more intuitive navigation, better organisation, and improved search functions. Additionally, there is a call for increased advertising and visibility, particularly through social media and traditional outlets. The importance of disseminating information within educational institutions is also mentioned. Respondents express a desire for clearer, more straightforward information about the programmes, including the application process and project details, and advocate for intensified support and guidance through local youth information services such as Eurodesk multipliers, guidance videos, and shared experiences by former volunteers.

Intercultural experiences attract, but young people also see meaning in contributing closer to home

At present, a vast majority of surveyed organisations (94%) engage international volunteers from within the EU/Schengen area, followed by 51% that include international volunteers from outside the EU/Schengen. National volunteers are supported by 32% of the organisations, showing the programme's primary focus is on international cooperation within the EU.

Volunteering within the European Union/Schengen area is the most preferred option for young people. Over 80% of them are also interested in volunteering beyond the European Union/Schengen area. It is however noteworthy that young respondents also express a substantial interest in local or national volunteering. This balanced interest suggests that while the allure of international experiences is strong, there is also a desire to contribute meaningfully close to home.

Digital and other new forms² of volunteering – discrepancies in interests between organisations and young people

The survey also tried to establish which new forms of volunteering could have potential to attract both organisations and young people.

In terms of digital volunteering, only about 14% of organisations currently offer such opportunities, with a small fraction (5%) planning to introduce them. A majority (56%) do not provide these opportunities, citing reasons ranging from lack of implementation to uncertainty about its feasibility. However, a significant portion (23%) expresses interest in digital volunteering.

Young people without prior experience of the ESC show greater interest in digital volunteering compared to current/former volunteers. This difference highlights the potential for digital volunteering to serve as an entry point for those facing geographic or logistical barriers, particularly non-EU residents – who found this alternative more appealing than the others.

² Definitions of various forms of volunteering were provided in the survey to ensure respondents had a common understanding of the terms. They included:

- Intergenerational volunteering: activities involving individuals of different age groups, typically younger and older generation.
- Tandem volunteering: involves two volunteers working closely together, often from diverse backgrounds.
- Spontaneous volunteering: unplanned and immediate, in response to sudden needs or situations.
- Micro-volunteering: in smaller, more manageable ways that require minimal time commitment.
- Episodic/casual volunteering: periodically or occasionally, allowing people to contribute based on their availability and interest in specific events or projects.
- Skills-based volunteering: with a focus on volunteers' specific skills or expertise to contribute to specific projects.
- Local/Community-based volunteering: with a focus on the community and addressing local needs.

Organisations listed local/community-based volunteering as the most popular form of volunteering, with an average rate of 4.36 on a scale³ from 1 to 5. This underscores organisations' prioritisation of addressing local needs of the community. Skills-based volunteering follows closely (4.19). Intergenerational and tandem volunteering (respective rates 4.16 and 4.09) also garner considerable interest, emphasising a collective and diverse approach to volunteering. Conversely, episodic volunteering (3.50), micro-volunteering (3.41), and spontaneous volunteering (3.36) garner less interest. This seems to highlight the importance of the creation of meaningful and sustainable community benefits through strategic, mission-aligned volunteer initiatives.

For current/former volunteers, team-based and skill-based volunteering, with an average of 4.30 on a scale from 1 to 5, stand out as a preferred mode. Contrary to organisations, spontaneous volunteering, rated at 4.20, appeals to volunteers. They also like the idea of tandem volunteering (4.09), whereas micro-volunteering (3.86) and episodic/casual volunteering (3.83) score slightly lower. Intergenerational volunteering presents a discrepancy in interest levels between organisations and volunteers, with organisations possibly valuing this approach more than the volunteers (3.49).

³ A scale of 1 to 5 was used to measure the level of interest. The scale was defined as follows: 1 - "Not Interested at All", 2 - "Not Very Interested", 3 - "Neutral", 4 - "Somewhat Interested" and 5 - "Very Interested".

Sufficient funding is the primary concern of organisations

For organisations, funding is a primary concern, with 68% of respondents seeking more financial support or a streamlined application process. Networking is also a priority, with 14% of organisations desiring better collaboration opportunities at various levels. Other areas for improvement include training for volunteers or staff (10%), administrative support (6%), and promotional assistance (2%).

Open-ended responses emphasise the need for increased financial support to cover rising programme costs and the need to reduce administrative inefficiencies to focus on volunteer and community development. The necessity for better support in inclusion and accessibility, programme adaptations, and strengthening international cooperation were also mentioned several times.

Zooming in on support and capacity building of organisations, it is difficult to find a clear favourite among suggested measures; cross-border mobility for youth workers, improving the learning dimension of volunteering, fostering cooperation and information sharing among stakeholders, enhancing the quality and sustainability of the activities, and recognising youth work's role in promoting quality volunteering opportunities are all supported by approximately 50% of the organisations.

Respondents expressed a desire for the programme to offer more than project funding, including support for organisational development, recognition, and a supportive environment for volunteers and organisations. Improved insurance and visa support were highlighted as essential for enabling international volunteer mobility and reducing participation barriers.

Future trends may include a focus on measurable outcomes, increased emphasis on emotional and personal support, and a move towards more personalised and sustained support structures. Additionally, there may be a shift towards collaboration, professionalisation and standardised approaches in the post-project support landscape.

Volunteers' support needs vary in the different phases of volunteering

Before leaving their country of residence, current/former volunteers consider the financial and administrative support being the most critical. In addition to the standard support forms like health and safety information, mentorship, training, and language training, young respondents stress the importance of community building, host organisation preparedness, financial management, and personalised support.

During volunteering, financial assistance, interpersonal skills support, language learning and intercultural support are highly valued. Learning and reflection support, including Youthpass, is considered significant but slightly less critical. It is worth noting that the insufficiency of allowances was reported as being due to rising living costs.

Post-volunteering support is essential for volunteers' reintegration, with key needs including recognition, continued engagement and training opportunities as well as practical assistance and career guidance.

Survey data reveal two additional areas for improvement: Volunteers reported dissatisfaction with some host organisations that seem to view them as sources of cheap labour. Volunteers also indicated a need for clarity and fairness in volunteer rights.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Qualitative data was acquired through focus group interviews with different stakeholders (n=55) within the programme, namely representatives from organisations (n=20), trainers (n=13), and former and current volunteers (n=22).

Organisations' insights on improving the quality of volunteering

In interviews with organisations, transparency and collaboration are repeatedly emphasised as crucial for successful volunteer engagements. Organisations face challenges in resource allocation, capacity building, and maintaining transparent communications with both NAs and volunteers. These challenges point out the need for stronger partnerships and better alignment between local and EU organisations to ensure that all parties have the necessary support and clear expectations.

The issue of fostering solidarity among partners is especially noticeable in the relationships between organisations located in the program countries and the neighbouring partner regions. The current dynamics often lead to unbalanced cooperation, where partners from the neighbouring regions may feel subordinate or less involved in leading projects.

Capacity building within organisations is identified as an area needing significant strengthening. The interviews suggest that more solid support from National Agencies, including clearer communication and better resource distribution, would greatly benefit local organisations. This support should extend to comprehensive training programmes that are sensitive to the specific needs and contexts of organisations. Strengthening the collaboration between National Agencies and organisations through shared best practices and resources can elevate project outcomes and volunteer experiences.

“What can help us, as national agencies and organisations, is to have a strong, reliable network in which we can support each other and constantly share information about new attitudes, new methods, new observations and to try to always be two steps ahead.”

Representative of an organisation

As for improving the volunteering experience, mentoring emerges as a crucial element, providing both professional and personal development opportunities. Effective mentorship can bridge the gap between the potential and actual benefits of volunteering.

Projects that incorporate a degree of flexibility to allow volunteers to explore various roles and engage more fully with their tasks maintain high levels of motivation and commitment. Co-creating projects with volunteers is highlighted as a promising approach to increase volunteer engagement and satisfaction.

Finally, the organisations recommend establishing of a quality assurance and assessment framework to uphold the highest standards of project implementation and volunteer satisfaction. Such frameworks could include quality standards, periodic evaluations of projects, comprehensive feedback mechanisms for volunteers, and regular updates and training sessions for host organisations.

To conclude, the interviews reveal essential insights into improving the structure and operation of volunteer activities. By addressing the highlighted needs for greater transparency, increased capacity building, balanced partnerships, effective mentoring, and strategic preparation, the programme can better serve both volunteers and organisations, fostering a more inclusive, effective, and empowering volunteering environment.

Volunteers' vision on critical points for improvement

Many volunteers join the Solidarity Corps for personal growth or a break from traditional careers, but over time, their motivations often move toward a deeper commitment to solidarity, community impact, and profound personal transformative potential. This shift showcases volunteering's power to foster belonging, confidence, and self-awareness in addition to skills development.

While volunteers find volunteering a comprehensively enriching experience, they report challenges particularly related to information flow, transparency, and support from organisations. Respondents mention having started their voluntary work without a proper understanding of their responsibilities or knowing whom to ask for support, which could lead to feelings of abandonment and frustration. This points to a need for better communication, structured onboarding, and strong mentorship to guide volunteers and validate their contributions.

"All you need is to be 18 to 30 years old and have motivation. Sure, but then when you look at the population who actually get to volunteer – I know about it, I'm also recruiting, I plead absolutely guilty to you – all the ones [who get to volunteer] are people with at least a bachelor or an A-level degree."

Europeer and former volunteer

Accessibility and inclusivity within the programme also emerged as critical concerns among current and former volunteers. The European Solidarity Corps is perceived by some participants as favouring individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, while barriers exist for those with disabilities, mental health challenges, and those who cannot commit to long-term projects. The host organisations' prioritisation of skilled over less-experienced volunteers further complicates accessibility, potentially excluding those who could benefit the most from such opportunities. These opinions highlight the necessity of revising the programme's outreach and engagement strategies.

"It was weird being back. More information [is] needed about what we can do next and how to stay connected."

Former volunteer

The data also suggest that while the programme formally promotes inclusivity, the programme structures and its implementation do not align with these ideals. Addressing these discrepancies would require a comprehensive strategy including a simplified application process, more accessible language, and tailored support that acknowledges the diverse circumstances of potential volunteers.

“It was strange not having a project to work on. I felt a bit empty. I want to motivate others to live that experience.”

Former volunteer

Feedback from young respondents suggests that standardising the volunteers’ training cycle would ensure volunteers’ equal right to proper support at different stages of their projects.

Namely, there is worrying variation in volunteers’ experiences. Many express dissatisfactions with (online) training and a lack of physical pre-departure sessions. As for the other trainings, arrangements differ so widely that their perceived usefulness ranges from being described as “online, very bad, literally the same as the first [training]” to “good, a nice way to reflect on the gathered experiences”.

The post-project transition phase prompted reflections on the experience’s impact and continuity. Respondents expressed excitement, gratitude, and a strong desire for ongoing support – as well desire to stay active and contribute to society.

“Back to the Future Lab” paints a picture of a more visible, accessible, flexible, impactful, and greener programme

A second qualitative research component included a 4-day workshop, the “Back to the Future Lab”, aiming to provide insights into the futures of volunteering. The workshops employed a focus group approach, allowing participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences.

A total of 12 former volunteers participated, seven being concurrently in the EuroPeer Network. The distribution of participants by country of residence is as follows: Germany (n=3), Slovenia (n=2), The Netherlands (n=1), Ireland (n=1), Belgium (n=1), Italy (n=1), Spain (n=1), Finland (n=1), and Poland (n=1).

The feedback gathered from the workshops aligns closely with the quantitative and qualitative results presented in the previous chapters.

Furthermore, the “Messages from the Future” workshop revealed participants’ visions for the European Solidarity Corps’ preferred future, with the following citations and descriptions illustrating how the young participants imagine its evolution over the next decade.

VISIBILITY

"The programme is much more visible aside from advertisements and social media posts, there are presentations in every high school and university, and therefore the 'new' European youth magazine and volunteer festivals are very popular."

ACCESSIBILITY

"The European Youth Portal has been redesigned and is now way more accessible than it was ever before."

PRE-DEPARTURE SUPPORT

Volunteers receive comprehensive pre-departure information, including cultural insights, rights and duties, and emergency contacts. Language support begins before departure, and there are info packs and helpdesks available.

MENTORSHIP

"During the project your mentor will be an old volunteer, so you don't have the conflict of interest that your boss would have in the same position."

ON-ARRIVAL TRAINING

The on-arrival training is standardised and conducted timely (within one month in the project), ensuring volunteers are well-prepared.

FLEXIBILITY

"It is also possible to apply for multiple projects, for a total of 24 months. Don't worry, they don't have to be consecutive - and you can also take a break during a project if you want!"

"There is no age limit. There is no ending point at 34 or 35 whatsoever. You can do it as long as you want, as long as you're fit and healthy enough."

"If a student wants to volunteer but doesn't want to quit school at the same time, they can go to the projects, but they are allowed to interrupt them for a couple of weeks, maybe two, three weeks to finish the exams and then continue with the project without any negative consequences."

QUALITY AND STANDARDS

Diversity Standards: Improved standards ensure diverse and inclusive volunteer groups, preventing isolation based on nationality or language. Quality Control: Ongoing quality control measures include regular training sessions and volunteer feedback mechanisms. Dedicated contact persons in national agencies and the European Commission address issues promptly.

RECOGNITION AND REWARDS

"Remember to get your [volunteer] card. It's very similar to a student card. You get reduced fees for going to the theatre, to the museum, or to concerts. And you can also use public transport for free."

"Your volunteering experience will help you by finding a job more easily, and can also count for credits at your educational institute."

SUSTAINABILITY AND GREEN INITIATIVES

"Public transport is also made free for volunteers across the country they're volunteering in, allowing them to explore and really get involved in the culture that they're now being introduced to."

"There's a big increase in climate projects, specifically targeting climate collapse and targeting how to improve air quality in cities."

COMMUNITY AND FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

"You will be involved in the yearly volunteer meeting where you can meet all current and old volunteers with the possibilities to catch up, make new connections and follow interesting workshops."

FUNDING AND COLLABORATION

"The European Commission is way more reactive to inflation. So you don't have to wait a year to have an increase of the budget money directly."

"We also see that the organisations really work with each other. They don't work against each other. They try to collaborate as much as they can."

CONCLUSION

This executive summary highlights the European Solidarity Corps' impact and evolving dynamics. Key findings emphasize the need for enhanced inclusivity, stronger support structures, and more effective outreach strategies.

As the Corps moves forward, it is essential to support the ongoing endeavour to strengthen European youth volunteering by upholding high-quality standards, fostering innovation, and ensuring sustainable, inclusive practices. These efforts will be crucial to maintaining the programme's relevance and empowering young people to create lasting societal impact.

SALTO European Solidarity Corps

SALTO ESC supports National Agencies and organisations in the youth field and beyond with the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme. The mission is to explore the potential of solidarity as a core value in European societies and to promote the use of the European Solidarity Corps as a tool for understanding and living solidarity. SALTO ESC coordinates networking activities, training, seminars and events that will support the quality implementation of the programme and maximise its impact. By doing this, SALTO ESC contributes to building a European Solidarity Corps community of organisations. SALTO ESC is hosted by OeAD. The OeAD is the national agency for the implementation of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps in Austria. SALTO ESC is part of a European network of SALTO Resource Centres with the mission to improve the quality and impact of the EU youth programmes as well as to support and develop European youth work.

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