

Position Paper

The Future of the European Solidarity Corps Programme

Background

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme is the key programme in Europe for young people to engage in quality volunteering and solidarity activities across the continent. Succeeding the previous European Voluntary Service (EVS), the ESC programme is now a standalone EU programme, allowing for the greater budgetary and political investment that youth volunteering and solidarity deserve.

The present document outlines the positions of the European Youth Forum on the future of the ESC programme as a whole - with the exception of the humanitarian aid volunteering strand - and aims to bring to the table the vision of youth organisations and young people in the context of the ESC 2021-27 mid-term evaluation and ESC 2018-20 final evaluation, as well as to the upcoming ESC successor programme negotiations.

Key Demands

- Triple the overall budget envelope for the European Solidarity Corps successor programme.
- Accommodate the annual budget envelope for the rising inflation and be indexed accordingly. Furthermore, the programme should be flexible enough to adapt during the same financial year to such events.
- Establish a framework for the recognition of competencies acquired through volunteering.
- Maintain the ESC as a standalone programme separate from Erasmus+.
- Include youth work and youth organisations as an additional horizontal priority in the upcoming ESC successor programme.
- Lower the age limit to take part in solidarity activities to 16, both for in-country and international placements.
- Renew investments to ensure that the ESC programme reaches out to as many young people with fewer opportunities as possible as set in its goals, while improving data gathering and monitoring.
- Increase communication, outreach and capacity building activities of both the European Commission and Erasmus+ National Agencies, targeted both towards potential participants and specifically for youth organisations to engage as sending or hosting organisations.
- Simplify the programme in terms of administration at all stages, including application, implementation and reporting.
- Reassess the various IT tools to ensure their continuous glitches are fixed and their user-friendliness is improved.
- Establish centralised calls for solidarity projects coordinated by EACEA.
- Establish the “EU Volunteer Status” legally recognised across all countries participating in the ESC, to facilitate cross-border solidarity and the mobility of young volunteers.
 - Such status should be accompanied by a special visa category for ESC participants with fast-track, free of charge visa procedure. This visa application process should have a maximum time frame of two weeks.
 - The “EU Volunteer” status should allow for legal, political and financial recognition of the benefits and competences acquired through volunteering at European level, by establishing a framework that validates these learning outcomes in formal education and the job market.
- Reform and improve the governance and flow of information within the ESC programme by including the European Youth Forum as an observer in the ESC Programming Committee meetings, and National Youth Councils in advisory bodies of their respective Erasmus+ National Agencies.

Budget, Objectives and Priorities

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) Programme, established to foster solidarity and promote active citizenship among young people, stands as a crucial instrument to address societal challenges and provide young people in Europe with the opportunity to develop social, professional and civic competencies through quality volunteering.

I. The imperative for increased budget

The European Youth Forum firmly advocates for an increased budget for the European Solidarity Corps Programme beyond the €1.009 billion from the current programming period. Recognising the immense impact the programme has had on youth engagement, social cohesion, and community development, it is crucial that the budget of the ESC is commensurate with its ambitions. This is currently not the case, leaving numerous young people without the opportunity to take part in the programme¹. A larger budget would enable the ESC programme to accommodate a greater number of projects, participants and Quality Label organisations, expanding its reach and maximising the potential for positive societal change. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum calls upon European legislators to triple the budget for the European Solidarity Corps successor programme.**

II. Relevance to young people's competence development

One of the primary objectives of the European Solidarity Corps Programme is to contribute to the personal and professional development of young people. ESC serves as a catalyst for building a generation of socially responsible and active young citizens. To ensure it remains this way, **the European Youth Forum calls for legal, political and financial recognition of the benefits and competences acquired through volunteering at European level by establishing a framework that validates these learning outcomes for formal education and the job market².**

III. Impact of COVID-19, war in Ukraine and inflation

The inception of the European Solidarity Corps coincided with a period of multiple crises in Europe and the world. Only two years after kicking off, the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the globe, leading to lengthy confinement and mobility-reduction policies everywhere. As a programme that relies heavily on cross-country mobility of young volunteers, its implementation was heavily hindered until well into 2022, especially for volunteers from beyond the EU coming into the EU. The Russian invasion of Ukraine led to many Ukrainian volunteers discontinuing their placement, while it also generated a period of rampant inflation. In various countries, contributions paid to volunteers hardly sufficed to cover their costs. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum calls for the annual budget envelope of the ESC to accommodate for the rising inflation, and for the project budgets to include a degree of flexibility enough to adjust them for the project duration, in case of sharp increases of costs of living.**

IV. The advantage of ESC as a standalone programme

The European Youth Forum strongly advocates for the European Solidarity Corps to remain a standalone programme with its own budget. This strategic autonomy is instrumental for several reasons. First and foremost, having a dedicated budget streamlines the allocation of resources specifically for volunteering and solidarity activities in the EU. Second, it enables a more flexible and responsive approach to the evolving needs of young people and volunteering, ensuring that the work of the EU in the sector remains dynamic and adaptable, and facilitating a direct oversight over the programme through youth ministries of the Member States, unlike in Erasmus+ which is usually led by education ministries. Furthermore, the decision to separate the European Solidarity Corps from the Erasmus+ Programme allows for it to preserve its distinct identity and visibility, while it safeguards volunteering in Europe as a political priority and

1 RAY Network (2023) - *Research-Based Analysis of the European Solidarity Corps. Special Programmatic Study*

2 European Youth Forum (2022) - *Research on volunteer-based youth work: Final report*

funnels the attention and funding required to meet the diverse and evolving needs of European youth. **The European Youth Forum therefore calls to maintain the independent nature of the ESC as a standalone EU programme.**

V. Horizontal priorities of the ESC programme

The European Solidarity Corps Programme, as the primary EU programme fostering the development of young individuals in Europe through volunteering and solidarity, holds significant transformative potential to enable young people to enact positive changes across the continent. In order to bring about that positive change, the programme currently lays on four main horizontal priorities, namely Inclusion and Diversity; Environment and Fight Against Climate Change; Participation in Democratic Life, Common Values and Civic Engagement; and Digital Transformation. Whereas those priorities are relevant, one of the main characteristics of the European Solidarity Corps Programme is its support to the youth sector in Europe through the development of youth volunteering and ultimately the competences of young people. However, the programme still falls short in terms of the involvement of youth-led organisations³. As such, **the European Youth Forum believes that youth work and youth organisations should be included as an additional horizontal priority in the upcoming ESC successor programme.**

3 European Youth Forum (2018) - *Updated Position Paper For a Better European Solidarity Corps*

A European Solidarity Corps Programme that works for the youth sector

As one of the main EU youth programmes, the European Solidarity Corps has brought numerous benefits to young people and the youth sector in general all across Europe. It offers opportunities to young people in terms of personal and educational development precisely in the period of their lives in which they transition into becoming fully independent from their caretakers. It creates possibilities for young people with fewer opportunities to engage in the programme, while making volunteering less of a privilege and more of a right accessible to everyone. It also allows youth organisations and movements without legal personality to apply for projects with a lower administrative threshold than for instance the Erasmus+ Programme.

In order to ensure that the ESC programme retains its value and is adapted to the needs and realities of the youth sector in Europe, the European Youth Forum believes it should focus on and address the following points:

I. Inclusion and participation of young people and youth organisations in the programme

One of the main benefits of the ESC programme is the opportunities it creates for young people with fewer opportunities to volunteer and engage in solidarity activities that, otherwise, they would not have the resources, awareness or time for. Furthermore, youth organisations report that their participation in the ESC allowed them to engage further interested and motivated young people in their networks, both in terms of new volunteers and eventually staff.

While currently the programme advances steadily towards its goal for 2027, it still falls slightly short on the share of participants with fewer opportunities foreseen to engage by the end of 2022⁴. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum recommends renewed efforts to make sure that the ESC programme reaches out to as many young people with fewer opportunities as possible and well within its targets, while improving data collection to understand how each specific group is being targeted.**

Moreover, the current age limitation of the programme does not reflect the reality of volunteering on the ground, where more often than not volunteering experiences commence way before 18⁵. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum calls for the lowering of the minimum age to take part in all solidarity activities to 16.** Last but not least, the programme currently falls short in terms of involvement of youth organisations as hosting organisations, and could further tap into the potential of youth-led structures. For this reason, **the European Youth Forum recommends reinforced communication, outreach and capacity building activities of both the European Commission and Erasmus+ National Agencies, targeted specifically for youth organisations to engage as sending or hosting organisations.**

The programme should also acknowledge that there are mainly two types of beneficiaries of the ESC programme: disadvantaged youth for whom usually ESC is the first mobility experience, and youth that has already experienced mobility and wishes to devote their time to solidarity actions. These two target groups require highly diverse preparation, training and support before, during and after their respective ESC placements. For this reason, **the European Youth Forum calls for the preparation of placements - in particular the in-person seminars - to account for these different needs and to build on the competences of already experienced volunteers by organising peer learning sessions where they can support young volunteers who are for the first time abroad and engaging in volunteering.**

II. Administration and structure of the programme

The European Solidarity Corps Programme - and more specifically its solidarity strand - is largely implemented at a decentralised level. One of the advantages of the programme, in comparison for instance to Erasmus+ - is its higher accessibility and ease for smaller organisations and movements without a legal personality (which more often than not reflects the operational reality

4 European Commission - *Performance of the European Solidarity Corps*

5 RAY-Network (2019) - *Exploring the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps during its first year*

of local youth organisations) to apply for projects. However, bureaucracy remains excessively high, and the projects too rigid in terms of administration. For this reason, **the European Youth Forum calls for a further simplification of the programme in terms of administration at all stages, including application, implementation and reporting, to ensure further inclusion of smaller youth organisations and informal groups of young people.**

Currently the rigidity of the programme does not allow it to respond to periods of crises, as aforementioned. Furthermore, issues have been reported on the usage of IT tools at all levels, which significantly hinders the participation in the programme not only of volunteers and organisations, but of all stakeholders. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum calls for a reassessment of the various IT tools to ensure their continuous glitches are fixed and their user-friendliness is improved, including the Beneficiary Tool, Youth Portal (especially sections for organisations and young people), Dissemination platform, or Online Language Support system.**

Another aspect concerns the scope of the programme. Whereas many youth organisations have underlined the benefit of the strong scope of ESC on its impact at local level, for those youth organisations operating at European level that aspect is harder to prove, due to the transnational nature of their work. Currently, within the solidarity activities only Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas are accessible at centralised level. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum calls for EACEA to establish centralised calls for solidarity projects accessible to youth organisations operating at international level.**

Digitalisation and the forced temporary transition to online spheres during the COVID-19 pandemic was translated into various ESC placements taking part online. The programme should show flexibility to operate in a hybrid manner in terms of short-term volunteering placements, force majeure cases such as extended visa processes, or further inclusion of volunteers. Regarding the latter, instead of forcing youth with disabilities into an online format, **the European Youth Forum believes that the programme and placements need to undergo**

the necessary structural changes to become truly accessible for people with disabilities.

Furthermore, the main benefits of volunteering come through interpersonal connections and a sense of shared community, solidarity and belonging, which is more challenging to achieve in the digital realm. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum recommends that the ESC programme remains primarily offline in order for young volunteers to tap as much as possible into the benefits of the experience, introducing complementary online components mainly for the pre-departure and follow-up phases of placements.**

III. Way forward: “EU Volunteer” status and ESC programme governance reform

Two of the most positively transformative changes that the European Solidarity Corps could undergo concern the legal status of volunteers in Europe and the reform of the programme governance at all levels.

Regarding the former, one of the main challenges faced by volunteers currently relates to both the processing of visa applications and the legal and financial hurdles faced by volunteers from outside of the EU taking part in placements within the EU. Moreover, as already mentioned, recognition of volunteering across Europe remains an issue, both in terms of acknowledgement of competencies gained through volunteering experiences as well as in terms of the perceptions around volunteering among employers. Establishing an “EU Volunteer” status⁶ would set the ground for a common solution for those challenges, as well as for better visibility, accessibility and impact of the ESC programme. By associating a special visa category to those under the “EU Volunteers” status, ESC participants who required so would enjoy fast-track, free of charge visa procedures, ultimately facilitating cross-border solidarity and the mobility of young volunteers. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum calls for the establishment of an official “EU Volunteer” status for participants of ESC placements and of other volunteering programmes within the EU.**

6 SALTO European Solidarity Corps (2023) - *Position paper on Better Conditions for Youth Volunteering*

Until such status is established, **financial and legal support should be provided for ESC placements and projects involving third country nationals or legal residents in the EU as well as young refugees, to ensure that they are not discriminated against in taking part in the programme based on their nationality, national visa regulations and legal status - or lack thereof.**

With regard to the governance of the European Solidarity Corps, currently no structured process or platform exists to gather the input of stakeholders, beneficiaries and civil society. This, in turn, is translated into a loss of precious information that the European Commission DG EAC, EACEA and the National Agencies could access at programme design and implementation period, and not only at evaluation, as it is currently the case. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum should be included as an observer without voting rights in the Programme Committee responsible for the management of the European Solidarity Corps; hence foreseeing this in the rules of procedures of the relevant committee. Additionally, at national level, the bodies in charge of implementing the programme should include representatives from the country's National Youth Council in advisory bodies on the ESC programme.**



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