



EU Youth
Programmes

ESC

SAW

End and Midterm evaluation European Solidarity Corps

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I. Extensive summary in Dutch

Dit onderzoeksrapport draagt bij aan de evaluevaluatie van het afgelopen European Solidarity Corpsprogramma (2018-2020) en de tussentijdse evaluatie van het lopende programma (2021-2027) in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap. Het evaluatieonderzoek baseert zich op verschillende bronnen, met name interviews met vertegenwoordigers van het Nationaal Agentschap (NA) JINT en de Nationale Autoriteit (NAU) het Vlaams Departement Cultuur, Jeugd en Media, documentanalyse, kwalitatief onderzoek bij begunstigde organisaties, de analyse van RAY data en informatie uit het Qlik Dashboard.

Het rapport vertrekt van de standaardvragen van de Europese Commissie. De conclusies geven we weer onder de vijf evaluatiecriteria voorgesteld door de Europese Commissie. We sluiten af met enkele suggesties voor de toekomst van European Solidarity Corps (ESC).

Effectiviteit

ESC is een robuust programma dat een breed scala aan mogelijkheden biedt voor jeugd- en vrijwilligerswerk in de vorm van Individueel Vrijwilligerswerk, Vrijwilligersteams en Solidariteitsprojecten. Vanaf de oktober 2018 deadline om projecten in te dienen, toen ESC een zelfstandig programma werd, tot eind 2020 kende het Vlaamse NA €4.119.092,57 toe aan 161 projecten. Daarnaast ging nog €432.241,1 naar NET- en TEC-activiteiten. In de periode 2021-2023 werd een bedrag toegekend van € 4.973.777 aan 161 projecten.

Covid-19 beïnvloedde de uitvoering van het ESC-programma tussen 2020 en 2022, maar door de steun van het NA (JINT) en de veerkracht van jeugdwerk- en vrijwilligersorganisaties bleef de impact al bij al beperkt. Dankzij aanpassingen of uitstel konden de meeste goedgekeurde projecten uiteindelijk doorgaan.

Inclusie is een prioriteit voor ESC, en dat laat zich ook merken in de praktijk. ESC wordt effectief beschouwd als een manier om ook jongeren uit kansengroepen te laten proeven van internationalisering. Het onderzoek wees echter op de nood aan het verder toegankelijk maken van ESC, vooral voor jongeren in kansarmoede en met bijzondere aandacht voor jongeren als organisator van projecten. Korte termijnactiviteiten vormen een mogelijk middel om meer jongeren uit kansengroepen te laten deelnemen aan ESC en kunnen als opstap dienen voor langduriger (internationaal) engagement. Verschillende stakeholders pleiten ervoor dat de promotie van korte termijnactiviteiten door de Europese Commissie vanuit een inhoudelijke meerwaarde moet gebeuren, en dus niet vanuit de kostenbesparende logica die steeds sterker aanwezig lijkt.

Het langetermijneffect van ESC na de interventie wordt niet gestructureerd gemeten, maar er zijn aanwijzingen voor langdurige effecten. Vertegenwoordigers van de bevroegde organisaties wijzen op de rol van ESC in het verbreden van jongeren hun horizons, het bevorderen van cultureel begrip en het stimuleren van solidariteit. Ze wijzen ook op organisatorische veranderingen, zoals internationalisering die deel gaat uitmaken van de missies van betrokken organisaties, als gevolg van het inzetten op het ESC-programma. Via de organisaties loopt deze invloed ook door in de lokale gemeenschappen.

Efficiëntie

Sinds 2023 overtreffen de projectaanvragen voor vrijwilligerswerk het beschikbare budget. De stagnerende budgetprognose belemmert ESC om te groeien en het volledige potentieel te bereiken. Het NA is in staat om de beschikbare financiële middelen te beheren en te verdelen, maar moet projecten verkleinen en weigeren vanwege de beperkte budgetten.

Er is ook enige bezorgdheid over de toereikendheid van het budget voor de toegekende projecten, aangezien organisaties die vrijwilligers ontvangen niet altijd toekomen met de toegekende subsidie.

Het Departement Cultuur, Jeugd & Media fungeert als het NAU voor ESC in Vlaanderen, en superviseert de implementatie en rapportage aan de Europese Commissie. JINT vzw beheert de ESC-acties: ze ontvangt de aanvragen en onderzoekt de validiteit. JINT verduidelijkt en communiceert de ingewikkelde EU-beleidslijnen naar mogelijke begunstigden, waardoor deelname aan ESC toegankelijker wordt.

Ondanks inspanningen om administratieve processen te stroomlijnen, zijn er nog steeds problemen met ESC-managementondersteuningstools. De tools zijn niet gebruiksvriendelijk en een nog groter obstakel zijn de technische problemen. Hoewel er positieve ontwikkelingen zijn in de managementondersteuning, zoals minder uitgebreide eindrapportage en het kwaliteitslabel voor ESC-organisaties, blijven uitdagingen met IT-tools bestaan en hebben deze invloed op prestatie-indicatoren en het welzijn van de JINT medewerkers en de staf van (potentieel) begunstigde organisaties.

Relevantie

ESC-projecten omvatten diverse activiteiten die bijdragen aan maatschappelijke veranderingen zoals de emancipatie van jongeren en inclusie. Bij sommige organisaties is er bezorgdheid over het gebrek aan middelen voor verderlopende ondersteuning van vrijwilligers na het einde van het ESC-project of de activiteit.

Er is een consistentie in de prioritering van het leeraspect van individuele vrijwilligers in ESC-projecten, terwijl het streven naar maatschappelijke veranderingen op de tweede plaats komt. De verwezenlijking van leereffecten voor jongeren en maatschappelijke veranderingen varieert sterk per project.

Binnen de Vlaamse context identificeren we drie primaire groepen van *young people with fewer opportunities* (YPFO) die relevant zijn voor het ESC-programma: (1) kansarme jongeren, (2) personen die naar België zijn gemigreerd en (nog) geen volledig burgerschap hebben en (3) personen met een mentale of fysieke beperking. ESC wordt gebruikt door deze (intern erg diverse) groepen en biedt hen kansen. Verdere verbeterpunten voor de toegankelijkheid van het programma houden verband met leeftijdslimieten, verblijfsvoorwaarden, complexe procedures en de onbekendheid van ESC belemmeren de inspanningen voor inclusie.

Coherentie

Nationaal gefinancierde jeugdinternationalisatie is vrijwel verdwenen door het succes van EU-jeugdprogramma's waaronder ESC. Bel'J-programma is het enige complementair initiatief en is geïnspireerd door de architectuur van de EU-jeugdprogramma's.

Europese toegevoegde waarde

Begunstigde organisaties beschouwen ESC-projecten als transformerende ervaringen, vooral voor jonge deelnemers, terwijl ze ook kansen bieden voor organisatieontwikkeling en maatschappelijke verandering. ESC's autonomie als jeugdprogramma met een eigen Programmacomité binnen het Europese beleid biedt specifieke voordelen, maar het kleinere budget in vergelijking met Erasmus+ vormt een uitdaging.

De aanbevelingen in hoofdstuk 6 omvatten suggesties aan de Europese Commissie, het NA en de NAU, gericht op het verbeteren van het European Solidarity Corps-programma en het aanpakken van specifieke uitdagingen op vlak van o.a. inclusiviteit, efficiëntie en relevantie.

II. Introduction

This report contains an interim evaluation of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme 2021-2027 and the final evaluation of the ESC programme 2018-2020. The report is commissioned by the Flemish National Authority (NAU) which is the Department of Culture, Youth and Media (DCYM).

The Social Work Research Centre at Odisee University College, got assigned to complete this evaluation. As Social Work Research Centre, we stand for high-quality practice-based research. By doing so, we contribute to service provision and education. We focus on the realisation of fundamental rights and are committed to social justice, full citizenship and human dignity. Research findings can find their way into teaching content. At the same time, we actively incorporate feedback from the field, including youth work organisations, into shaping our research agenda.

The report was created through close collaboration with the National Agency (NA) JINT vzw and the NAU DCYM.

In the first section of the report, we delve into the methodology employed, outlining the roles of various stakeholders and the processes used for selecting and addressing questions. This section ends with a list of the abbreviations used.

In the second section of the paper, we present a compilation of questions along with formulated answers drawn from diverse data sources. Following the conclusions, we then formulate suggestions for the future of the ESC programme. Lastly you will discover a reference list, accompanied by a summary of the Tables and graphs provided, as well as the appendices.

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III. Methodology

Role of actors

Three partners were represented in the steering committee leading the evaluation. DCYM serves as the NAU, while JINT serves as the NA responsible for implementing the EU funding programmes Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps in the Flemish Community, situated in the Flemish and the Brussels-Capital Regions. The Social Work Research Centre of Odisee University of Applied Sciences was appointed as the research partner through a public procurement process. While Odisee took charge of preparing, coordinating, and executing the research activities, JINT and DCYM provided extensive feedback, collaborated in the planning process, and supplemented the preparations.

Furthermore, to realise certain specific support tasks in the youth field, the Flemish Youth Decree designates a range of non-profit umbrella organisations. Currently, these 'intermediate organisations' are De Ambrassade & Vlaamse Jeugdraad, JINT, Bataljong, Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten en de Kinderrechtencoalitie. The organisations that are not part of the steering committee were all contacted at the start of the evaluation process to inform and invite them. Due to recent staff changes and/or their limited expertise with EU programmes, their level of involvement was rather limited.

Selection of questions

The questions central in this report are taken from the European Commission's guidance note in which a set of questions are formulated (EC DG for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2023). This set of standard questions is *organised following the structure of the five evaluation criteria to be examined in line with the Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines*¹: *effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, European added value*.

In the report, aspects of each of the five evaluation criteria are discussed. In the Table 12, you will find an overview of the standard questions, along with an indication of the questions addressed in this report. In the conclusion, we refer back to the five evaluation criteria.

The selection of questions happened in close consultation with the three partners of the steering committee, namely the NAU DCYM, the NA JINT and the research partner Odisee. We discussed with the partners of the steering committee which subjects and themes were most relevant to them and for the Flemish context. Together with the partners we then selected the questions that were relevant and for which there was at least some data source available. This decision was made in consensus. Eventually, 17 out of 28 questions to evaluate ESC were retained (see Table 12).

¹ See Better Regulation Tool [br toolbox-nov 2021 en 0.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/better-regulation/br-toolbox-nov-2021_en_0.pdf)

The guidance questions appeared to be often multi-layered and complex. Recognising the need for clarity and precision, we systematically deconstructed these intricate inquiries into more tangible components. This approach aimed to enhance the overall comprehensibility of the research process, facilitating a more nuanced and focused exploration of each facet within the framework of the study. Parallely to the selection of questions, we listed up the available sources, including the RAY questionnaires, annual reports and/or people with the necessary expertise. We coupled the available sources to the questions, with the help of the partners of the steering committee.

Interviews National Agency and National Authority

A lot of expertise is with the NA and the NAU. To bring this experience to the evaluation, we organised a series of interviews between December 2023 and February 2024: one group interview with the NAU (three participants) and eight interviews with in total ten staff and management members of the NA. We discussed their view on and experience with the EU Youth Programmes. We also took the opportunity to pose targeted questions, elaborating on their unique expertise within the organisation and the programmes. These insights allowed us to answer some specific guidance questions. In the report we refer to these sources as 'Interviews NA' and 'Interview NAU'. After reviewing the advanced draft, staff members of the NA and the NAU made some additional points, which are clearly marked as such.

Qualitative inquiry on participating organisations

The perspective of organisations submitting projects in the EU Youth Programmes takes a crucial place in this report. We strived for a diverse range of organisations in terms of experience, programmes they submitted on, profile, age and location. Depending on their availability and preference, the inquiry took different forms. We organised one focus group with 5 participants, one double interview and three interviews with representatives of the following organisations:

- AFS Interculturele Programma's vzw
- De Ark Vlaanderen vzw
- JOETZ vzw
- Kiwanis Europe vzw
- Mobile School vzw
- Mu-zee-um vzw
- Roots Vlaanderen vzw
- UCOS vzw - Universitair Centrum voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking
- vzw AjKo

In the report we refer to this source as 'Survey organisations'.

The respondents for the organisational survey were recruited through various ways. Initially, an open call was distributed through the newsletter of the NA JINT. Additionally, JINT directly contacted representatives of organisations to invite them to participate. Furthermore, the research team personally approached representatives of organisations directly, mostly after having met on the Catch'Up event, a biennial training and networking event organised by the NA.

The primary objective of the organisational survey was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the practices developed in Erasmus+ Youth and ESC activities and to gather specific examples and insights from the field. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse sample in terms of experience, implemented actions from the EU Youth Programmes, geographical distribution and primary target groups.

However, it's important to note that the survey conducted among organisations does not yield representative results due to the limited sample size. Certain phenomena may have been captured to a greater or lesser extent, depending on whether they occurred in the organisations surveyed.

Document analysis

Documents that were analysed as a resource for answering the research questions are:

- Pots, S. (2023). *Inclusion in European Youth Programmes*. Tumult vzw.
- Stevens, F. (2017). *Midterm Evaluation Erasmus+: Youth In Action—Belgium (Flemish Community)*. Howest.be.
- Stevens, F., & Desnerck, G. (2021). *Effecten en uitkomsten van het Erasmus+ Youth in Action programma. Het perspectief van projectparticipanten en projectbegeleiders*. howest.be. www.jint.be/monitoring-en-analyse
- JINT. (2024). Covid effect, schriftelijke input voor Mid-term en eindevaluatie. JINT.

RAY SOC analysis

In the RAY SOC research project, the [RAY network](#) collects data on the implementation of ESC by sending standard surveys to participants in ESC projects and activities. Project participants and (members of) project teams were invited by e-mail to answer an online questionnaire. The datasets, along with an estimate of the response rate percentage, were supplied by the RAY network.

Before 2021, there were no separate ESC datasets, as the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and volunteering were actions under Erasmus+ Youth. In the period 2018-2020, the ESC programme was implemented as a stand-alone programme. However, for the period of 2021-2023, three national datasets (RAY SOC) are available.

The analyses of the data is based on the cleaned and harmonised data. The data were collected between June and October 2023 from projects that took place between 2021 and 2023. The datasets have been cleaned and harmonised by the RAY transnational research team.

The national datasets RAY SOC 2021-2023 with the number of respondents after harmonisation and the response percentage before data cleaning, as provided by the RAY data team are the following:

Questionnaire	Abbreviation	n	Response rate
ESC participants: Voluntary projects	VOL	96	56,1%
ESC participants: Solidarity projects	SOL	8	22,4%
ESC Project teams	PT	59	80,5%

When interpreting the data, it is important to be mindful of specific considerations.

- Due to a technical issue with the online survey, not all respondents got to see the randomised thematic and impact modules in the SOC VOL questionnaire. 61 of the 96 respondents of the SOC VOL questionnaire jumped straight from the opening module to the reflection module of the questionnaire. Consequently, this restricts the pool of respondents from which we can draw conclusions about the thematic modules (which consist of six to eight questions) and the two impact modules (which comprise ten questions).
- The other 35 SOC VOL respondents were randomly distributed over four thematic modules and two impact modules. This restricts the sample of respondents from which we can draw conclusions. Further specifications, for example based on proxies for belonging to an inclusion group, lead to only a few responses per thematic module or impact module, making this kind of comparisons between for example the impact for participants with or without fewer opportunities impossible.
- The sample of respondents that completed the SOC SOL questionnaire is rather small (n=8), limiting the possibilities to make statements on Solidarity projects based on the RAY data.
- The RAY SOC data collected from 2021 to 2023 is challenging to compare with the data from 2018 to 2020 due to the application of different methodologies, offering different items to respondents, and providing participants of ESC with the same questionnaires as participants in Erasmus+.

Overall, we urge caution when interpreting the RAY data. The RAY data provide relevant indications but for now it's difficult to estimate to what extent generalisations are possible and it is not always possible to compare the data from the two Multiannual Financial Frameworks (MFF).

Qlik Dashboard

The software company Qlik offers a platform for data analytics. Qlik gathers data from sources such as the programme monitoring and management tools, participant surveys, project reports, and administrative records maintained by project organisers, the NA and the European Commission. Based on these databases, Qlik generates a range of dashboards presenting aggregated data on the EU Youth Programmes. The dashboards are managed by the European Commission. The NA possesses the expertise to effectively navigate the platform and provided data that is integrated in this report. Typically we performed some additional calculations to arrive at presentable results.

In the report we refer to this data source as 'Dashboard'.

It should be noted that while for some indicators, the EC dashboards offer quite solid datasets (that can be verified by matching NA information), for other indicators, the data quality is much more questionable, and as a result, difficult to interpret correctly. Generally, full transparency lacks in terms of how certain indicators have been measured. Also, for a number of core indicators across or even within Programme Actions, the dashboard data is clearly incomplete. In other cases, data collection happened in a non-consistent manner across Call Years, for instance by changing the way of measuring indicators, which undermines a comparative perspective.

More precisely:

- With regard to participant numbers, for Solidarity projects, only the core group of five young people is counted, not the wider community group of involved in the project.
- With regard to participants with Fewer Opportunities (FO):
 - Until 2020 'Special Needs' were counted separately from Young People with Fewer Opportunities (YPFO), but from 2021 both categories have been merged
 - From 2021 onwards the basis for calculation of this indicator is the budget item 'inclusion support' and not the actual profile of the participant. This budget item is only available for volunteering. No data is available on the participants in solidarity projects
- With regard to project topics, the topics of volunteering projects (as mentioned in the ESC Quality Label applications by the beneficiaries) are not transferred into the relevant dataset.
- Projected budget data on volunteering projects is lacking, resulting in a distorted image of the actually submitted budgets by beneficiaries.

- Data on the ESC 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 is also presented in different dashboards, organised differently. This hinders the comparability of these two program periods.

As a result, caution is needed when interpreting the dashboard data.

List of Abbreviations

DCYM – Department of Culture, Youth and Media for the Flemish Community

E+ – Erasmus+

EC – European Commission

ESC – European Solidarity Corps

EVS – European Voluntary Service

EU – European Union

FO – Fewer Opportunities

MFF – Multinational Financial Framework

NA – National Agency

NAU – National Authority

NET – Networking Activities

NEET – Not in Education, Employment, or Training

OLS – Online Language System

PMM – Project Management Tool

PT – Project Teams

RAY – Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes

SALTO – Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities

SOL – Solidarity projects

TEC – Training and Evaluation Cycle

VOL – Volunteering Projects

VZW – Vereniging Zonder Winstoogmerk (non-profit organisation)

YPFO – Young People with Fewer Opportunities

YWM – Mobility of Youth Workers

IV. Answers to the standard questions

1. Outputs and results

To what extent have the three programmes European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 delivered the expected outputs, results and impacts? What negative and positive factors seem to be influencing outputs, results and impacts? We are interested in the impact of all elements of the two programmes. We are also interested in the impact of elements that have been discontinued between the period 2018-2020 and the period 2021-2027 of European Solidarity Corps and/or the European Voluntary Service to the extent that it might help to design the future programme.

1.1. Inputs & outputs

The ESC programme has an impact on all involved stakeholders. Assessing this impact is complex, and capturing the impact is an ongoing challenge. We therefore rely on several sources to provide insight.

First, we look at **inputs and outputs**, which includes the budget expenditure compared to the quantity of received and awarded projects and the number of participants awarded (EC DG for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2023 Annex 2).

ESC exists as a stand-alone program since autumn 2018. From the October deadline in 2018 to the end of 2020 the Flemish NA granted €4.119.092,57 to 161 awarded projects with 898 awarded participants, as is visible in Table 1 (Dashboard). The participant number is an underestimation, as for Solidarity projects only the organising young people are counted as participants (a group of 5 young people), not the whole group/community for which the project is set up.

In 2018-2020 88% of the received projects got successfully granted (see Table 1).

In addition, in 2018-2020 the Networking Activities (NET) reached out to 975 participants and created opportunities for training and networking for a realised budget of €165.216,10. An additional budget of €267.308,50 has been spent on the Training and Evaluation Cycle (TEC) for young volunteers and Quality Label organisations. These TEC-activities gathered 646 participants, mainly volunteers in on-arrival and mid-term trainings during their volunteering projects in Flanders (Dashboard).

The ESC remained a stand-alone EU Youth Programme under the MFF 2021-2027. The Flemish National Agency granted €4.973.777 to 161 projects with 939 awarded participants, in the period 2021-2023 (Table 2). Again, the latter is an underestimation, as for Solidarity projects only the organising young people are counted (a group of 5 young people), not the whole group/community for which the project is set up (Dashboard).

From 2021 to 2023, 86% of the received projects got successfully granted (see Table 2). It should be noted that the requested budget for 2023 was 169,16% of the available budget for projects. Especially for Volunteering projects, budgetary restraints led to a much lower number of volunteers granted than the organisations had requested. The Quality Label organisations' ambitions of in terms of steadily increasing their numbers of receiving or sending volunteers, are thus not matched by adequately growing budgets for volunteering since the Quality Label ESC budget evolution is rather flat. In addition, there is no financial space to award additional Quality Labels, impeding the further growth potential of ESC. In sum, the budget is insufficient for both the current, actual as well as potential demand (Additional point NA based on budget 2023 ESC).

Similar to the 2018-2020 period, in the current programme networking activities are supported on the national and transnational level, they are specifically mentioned as quality and support measures for ESC. For 2021 and 2022 this resulted in a total of 1.894 participants in these networking activities for a realised budget of €231.034,20. The TEC reached also in these two years out to 42 participants in 2021, a number much impacted by the Covid-19 restrictions to meet in a training setting, and to 235 in 2022. The realised budget for these activities is €131.297 (JINT, 2024 ; Additional point NA).

1.2. Contribution of ESC to the objectives

ESC has some well-defined general and strategic objectives. To evaluate the degree to which these objectives are achieved, we examine the perspectives of ESC project team members (see Table 3 and Table 4).

According to the project team members, their projects contributed most strongly to ESC's general objectives related to inclusion. General objectives that have been contributed to the least according to project team members, are the promotion of sustainable development and to strengthen democracy (Table 3).

The most reached strategic objectives during the 2021-2023 project cycle, according to the ESC project team members, are the improvement of competences of young people, to provide young people with opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities and to facilitate the continuous engagement of young people as active citizens (Table 4).

The Quality and Support measures managed by the NA contributed to the general objectives of the programme as they facilitate the accessibility of the programme and ensure quality in the support to organisations and young people (Sterckx et al., 2023).

Examples provided by the NA include supporting project beneficiaries by enabling their participation in activities organised by other NAs or the translation of SALTO Inclusion and Diversity A-Z (SALTO Inclusion & diversity, 2022) (Additional point NA).

1.3. The impact of Covid-19 on the ESC programme

In 2020, there was no noticeable impact of Covid-19 on the number of applications from organisations or young people (JINT, 2024).

From all mobility actions within both EU programmes, volunteering was the least affected since many volunteering projects could take place, though in an adapted manner. As employers had to make a quick shift to home offices and to socially distance working on the work floor, hosting organisations also adapted the working environment for the volunteers. At the start of the crisis, the NA supported volunteers who were forced to or wanted to return to their home country. A key issue was getting data on volunteers as this is available in the youth portal but not accessible to the NA. After a short period, volunteers returned to their activities and for some organisations, ESC volunteers became even more important as the regular local volunteers could not be there. Throughout the crisis, the NA kept the dialogue going with the organisations (JINT, 2024).

Covid-19 caused challenges for solidarity projects. Some of them were in the possibility to look for alternative ways to carry out their activities, mostly online. At the onset of 2020, many organisations halted their activities due to the imposed measures, despite retaining hopes of executing the planned projects. Later in the same year, projects looked for alternative ways to achieve their goals. But for more than ten Solidarity projects this was not possible and some requested the NA for more time to achieve their goals (JINT, 2024)

2. The inclusion priority

With regard to the inclusion priority, what are the main concrete impacts of the European Solidarity Corps programmes 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 on the participants who are young people with fewer opportunities?

Several respondents from organisations affirm that ESC can have a significant impact, particularly on young people facing FO. The impact of ESC is potentially higher on Young People with Fewer Opportunities (YPFO) than others, because young people with fewer opportunities usually also have fewer opportunities for internationalisation.

“Because these days, most youngsters get opportunities on so many fronts to internationalise and travel and to go on Erasmus+ in their colleges and universities, and I have the impression that they often get less out of it (...) , than those guys who (...) go to volunteer abroad, and who suddenly find themselves in a situation where they are allowed to help (...), and that for once they are not on the side of the needy who are looked down upon and paternalized, but they go and help.” (Respondent Survey organisations, own translation)

We do not quantify the difference of impact based on the 2021-2023 RAY data because of the limited sample. The RAY analysis from 2015-2020 for the Erasmus+ Youth in Action programme (Stevens & Desnerck, 2021), including EVS/ESC, says that the differences of impact on participants from disadvantaged groups compared to young people who do not belong to a disadvantaged group are limited and variable. The authors conclude that overall there is no difference in the development of competences between young people from disadvantaged groups and those who do not belong to a disadvantaged group (Stevens & Desnerck, 2021, p. 68). Other studies stress that the learning outcomes of participants in the EU Youth Programmes are as high or even higher if they indicate one or more disadvantages compared to their peers (Meyers et al., 2020, p. 65).

However, from the current research we learn that ESC offers a quite accessible way for internationalisation, despite the remaining thresholds (Survey organisations). A main condition to include young people in general, and YPFO especially, is an intermediary organisation that reaches out to young people and can guide them through the process. Organisations experienced with ESC can work together with referents working with YPFO.

A main institutional barrier for inclusion are travel restrictions due to legal status. These challenges become particularly evident when attempting to involve young individuals with limited residence permits or non-Schengen passport (Survey organisations; (Pots, 2023)).

The minimum age requirement on 18 for participation in volunteering projects creates hurdles for inclusivity. Previously, individuals as young as 16 could participate as volunteers, but this is no longer an option. Notably, a significant group affected by this restriction is comprised of individuals aged between 16 and 18, particularly those classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youths. Furthermore, individuals born towards the end of the year face a disadvantage. For example, they are ineligible to

participate in ESC for a gap year at the start of the school year in September, as they have not yet reached the age of 18 when school activities commence (Interviews NA).

3. Increase short-term activities

With regard to European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027, what can be done in order to increase the number of participants in short-term activities (e.g. volunteering teams and solidarity projects) and, as a consequence, the number of participants in the whole Programme?

In addition to prolonged voluntary commitments, which can extend up to a year, ESC also offers shorter voluntary projects typically spanning from two weeks to two months. Based on the share of total participants in 2021-2023, half of the participants was going on a short-term ESC project (see Table 5).

However, responding organisations continue to emphasise the value of long-term activities. A long-term ESC project leads to the thorough development of personal skills of the volunteer, but also the added value for organisations and local communities is often greater as the volunteers get more things done (Survey organisations).

However, there is a perception that the European Commission prioritizes the promotion of short-term ESC opportunities. Short-term projects entail significantly lower costs, leading to concerns that their promotion would primarily focus on financial efficiency rather than other objectives (Survey organisations; Interviews NA).

Yet, organisations and staff members also acknowledge the potential benefits of short-term ESC activities, particularly for young individuals facing fewer opportunities. For those with fewer opportunities, extended stays abroad can pose challenges due to psychological barriers, such as unfamiliarity with travelling, and practical constraints, like having a financial responsibility in their households. The promotion of short-term ESC activities could go hand in hand with an inclusion strategy to reach out more to groups of YPFO.

4. Effects ESC after the intervention

To what extent are the effects of the solidarity activities likely to last, for both participants and local communities, after the end of the intervention?

The RAY questionnaires ask the members of project teams how they assess the sustainability of the project they were involved in. 95,83% (n=59) of the respondents responds to this question with a score of at least five on ten (Table 6). However, measuring the long-term impact of ESC is challenging. The RAY SOC data does not provide information on this component.

Some insights into the long-term impacts are provided in the interviews, particularly those conducted with the surveyed organisations. Representatives from beneficiary organisations acknowledge the potential of ESC to broaden the horizons of participating youth. Specifically, ESC experiences involving travel abroad help young individuals

recognise the vastness of the world beyond their immediate surroundings. One respondent emphasises the significance of ESC in shaping young people's identities, as it offers opportunities to explore different cultures while reinforcing their connection to Flemish, Belgian, and/or European society (Survey organisations).

Moreover, the representatives of beneficiary organisations recognise the solidarity aspect of ESC. Participation in ESC prompts young people to realise that complex issues transcend national borders. Solidarity projects within their own communities may also contribute to this awareness and foster a sense of solidarity. In some cases, former ESC volunteers continue to develop their skills and become involved as trainers in EU Youth Programmes and beyond. However, organisations often highlight their inability to sustain monitoring and support for young people post-ESC projects, resulting in a loss of contact with them (Survey organisations).

Further during the survey, several respondents testified how ESC and other EU Youth Programmes activities, have a lasting impact on their organisation, and thus on the local community. The long-lasting effects are not necessarily attributed solely to the ESC activity itself. Rather, the connections made, topics addressed, and partnerships formed create often lasting effects beyond the activity itself.

For certain organisations, the ESC projects have transformed into a fully operational unit within their organisational structure. The opportunities of the ESC are supporting their organisational policies and missions, are fostering expertise building and professionalisation (Survey organisations; Interviews NA).

European grants are vital to some of the surveyed organisations. This finding is confirmed by a Vleva study on how Flemish organisations receive and spend EU subsidies. The study point at how beside *financial support, they open doors to new opportunities and international cooperation, increase societal impact, promote sustainability and capacity building, stimulate innovation and contribute to policy objectives* (VLEVA, 2023, p. 14).

Obvious effects stem from the partnerships that are made to realise ESC projects. By promoting ESC to organisations working with young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, different organisations come into contact with each other. In this way, they both increase their expertise and network. As one representative explains:

“It is important (...) also for us as an organisation. You then have something to offer and something to learn. You work together on a project, which to me is still a much more effective way for Flemish youth work to become more diverse and inclusive than imposing your own model or your own volunteer work on people who may not have asked for it.”
(Respondent Survey organisations, own translation)

ESC projects are seen as promoting a more inclusive society, with organisations sometimes adjusting their operations to accommodate individuals with disabilities and engaging disadvantaged youth through international experiences (Survey organisations).

5. Appropriateness of the ESC budget

To what extent is/was the size of budget and the funding models appropriate and proportionate to what European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 set out to achieve?

The dashboard indicates that during the 2014-2020 cycle, 88.5% of the submitted ESC projects were awarded (as shown in Table 1). Between 2021 and 2023, the success rate remained steady at 86% (as per Table 2). That means the success rate of submitted projects is quite high. The success rate for solidarity projects is proportionally a bit lower, namely 80% in 2021-2023. In 2023, 69% of the 36 received solidarity projects got awarded (Table 2).

The National Agency points out that from 2023 onwards the budget requests for volunteering projects largely outreach the available budget (169%). Given the flat budget prognosis for ESC, the uncertainty of the additional budget from the Horizon Europe Mission and the strategic plans in the approved Quality Labels, it is clear that the demand will be much higher than the available budget also in the following years, even if the number of Quality Labels would not increase (Additional point NA). Where budgets for Erasmus+ Youth are increasing, as part of the larger Erasmus+ fund, this is not the case for ESC, which has been a stand-alone programme since autumn 2018.

From the organisational perspective, there are some concerns on the sufficiency of the awarded grant for individual ESC projects (Survey organisations). The RAY data underpin this concern: when asking the members of the project teams to assess the adequacy of the project funding, the results are quite mixed, as shown in Table 7. In brief, 68% of project teams members scores this question with a five or more (on ten), which means that for 1 out of 3 deem the funding to be inadequate (Table 7).

The organisational survey points at the possible source of dissatisfaction. Multiple representatives of organisations with long-standing experience in ESC and EVS noted that the own financial investment (not covered by EU Youth Programmes' grants), required by their organisation today is higher compared to previous periods, notably when volunteering projects were still operating as part of Erasmus+ (Survey organisations).

Several of the surveyed organisations do not always get by with the awarded ESC budgets. They then point mostly to long-term projects that include paying rent for an appartement, providing local transport... not to mention the staff costs to prepare and implement a project. For instance, to host two volunteers for a year-long stay, an organisation receives €28.000. However, one surveyed organisation mentioned that they need to contribute an additional €24.000 to €25.000 for the two volunteers. Moreover, if an organisation would host an ESC project for only one volunteer, they still need to go through all the administrative procedures while receiving only €14.000 per year, which may not be economically viable (Survey organisations).

At times, organisations may find themselves bearing financial consequences for decisions made by participants. For example because hosted volunteers want to move to another place, sometimes to a city where renting prices are higher, or because participants wish to terminate the project prematurely while some (renting) contracts and commitments persist (Survey organisations). Organisations that, for instance, have their own infrastructure where volunteers can stay typically face fewer or no issues in funding volunteer projects. However, this does not apply to the majority of organisations (Survey organisations).

Representatives of organisations perceive that the pocket money provided for young people is inadequate, requiring them to supplement it with additional funds from their own resources (Survey organisations).

However, the answers on the RAY question to participants how easy it was to pay their participation, shows that for most responding participants paying for the project was rather easy or even very easy (Table 8). If we relate affordability to young people's social background (measured as the extent to which young people experience barriers to opportunities), we find that for young people who do not experience barriers, affordability is perceived as easier (see Table 9).

6. Financial absorption levels of the National Agency

What were the financial absorption levels across National Agencies? Has the target number of participants in solidarity activities been achieved?

Just like all other National Agencies, JINT is setting up target numbers of how many participants should be achieved in ESC activities. These targets are communicated to the European Commission (Interviews NA).

As discussed above (Question 5), the ESC budget is not big enough to grant all qualitative projects (Interviews NA). Volunteer projects are being downsized by the NA to allow a larger number of organisations to receive grants for this action. In 2021 and 2022, this effect wasn't too bad, but it has worsened considerably in 2023. The reason why resources are insufficient is also partly due to the growth path that organisations foresee: after a few years of experience with the ESC programme, they would like to send out more volunteers, but the overall budgets do not follow this trajectory (Interviews NA).

7. The portal

To what extent has the portal replaced the functions of supporting organisations? Are there any duplications between the portal functions and the role of supporting organisations?

The portal may refer to one of the following:

- European Youth Portal (discussed under Question 9 in this report)
- Have Your Say (as translated in the Dutch version of the EC guidelines, but we lack data to provide further information about Have Your Say)

8. Indirect management

To what extent is the implementation of actions in indirect management appropriate, efficient, and well-functioning? How efficient is the cooperation between the European Commission and National Agencies, and to what extent does the European Commission fulfil its guiding role in the process? How has this evolved over time? What are the areas for improvements?

The European Executive Agency for Education and Culture is the European Commission agency responsible for the centralised implementation of the ESC programme. At the national level, and in Belgium's case regional level, NAUs and NAs manage the ESC programme.

For the Flemish Community (living in Flanders or belonging to the Dutch-speaking community in Brussels), the Flemish DCYM acts as NAU and thus bears legal and political responsibility vis-à-vis the European Commission. It monitors the implementation of ESC in Flanders, reports on a regular basis on the implementation and the results, contributes to the evaluation of the programme and also helps to shape the programme politically via the European policy processes between the European Commission and the EU Member States.

As the NA, JINT vzw is responsible for the management and implementation of the decentralised actions of ESC in Flanders and Brussels.

The benefit of this indirect management approach is that it allows JINT to position itself as an intermediate civil society partner and to occupy a bridging role between stakeholders in the youth field and the European Commission. Respondents from surveyed organisations acknowledged its significance and utility. They often find European Commission policies complex and ambiguous, underscoring the necessity for the NA to interpret and communicate them in a clear manner. Overall, JINT receives substantial recognition for fulfilling this role (Survey organisations). The indirect management lowers the threshold for organisations, including informal groups, to participate – apply for ESC.

Another advantage of the indirect management is exactly the fact that JINT can apply the budget for Networking activities (NET) to set up activities for and in close cooperation with the youth sector where it is embedded. It can detect needs and act upon them through NET activities, resulting in a support of the youth sector and its organisations and at the same time reaching out to organisations who can potentially benefit from the ESC programme and lower the threshold for them to get involved.

The autonomy to make decisions is also advantageous for the NA. A difficulty is that the ESC programme does not get the same attention as other EU programmes. The European Commission simply lets the programme run without providing any impulses. This also results in limited budgets, preventing the full potential of ESC from being realised.

9. Management support tools

To what extent are the management support tools (e.g. E+ Link, eForms, Mobility Tool, Lifecard NAM, Youth Portal, PMM, BM, Application Forms, EU Academy, eGrants) adequate and sufficient to support a sound management of the programme?

9.1. General impressions about the tools

Although the application for and management of the Erasmus+ Youth Programme demand significant administrative efforts, representatives of organisations and the staff of the NA experience the management of most ESC actions as even more administratively burdensome, especially for individual volunteering. The administrative burden increased over time (Survey organisations; Interviews NA).

In an attempt to streamline those administrative processes, there are quite a lot of IT tools, as is shown in an overview made by the staff of the NA (Figure 1).

Not all the IT tools were discussed individually. In general, the ESC management support tools encounter recurring technical glitches and are perceived as generally unfriendly to users. There is a prevailing impression that these issues have worsened over time, until recently (Survey organisations, Interviews NA).

Some organisations expressed their frustration because malfunctions in tools sometimes hinder them from completing necessary tasks, all the while the European Commission maintains strict deadlines and requirements (Survey organisations). They experience a lot of support from the NA, but the power to make real changes to the IT tools is generally not in their hands, but at the level of the European Commission.

“You may be strict, but then your own boutique has to be fine too. I can't stand that, no, no. If I don't get my business done on time, I will apologise and say "dear people, sorry, but that gives you flexibility too", but for example, the Commission comes almost consistently with deadlines, and they don't meet their own deadlines themselves, when they have to develop something new: a new mobility tool and a new this and a new that. They always set us deadlines, without being organised themselves.” (Respondent Survey organisations, own translation)

The **Youth Portal** should provide a comprehensive overview of volunteer opportunities within the ESC program, allowing potential volunteers to explore available options. However, several representatives of organisations express doubts about the effectiveness of the Youth Portal, describing it as unclear. Most projects listed on the Portal are individual voluntary projects, Volunteer Team projects being underrepresented. Additionally, potential volunteers have no means of assessing the quality of projects featured on the Youth Portal. Consequently, organisations often resort to utilising their own tools, such as posting proposals on their websites and specific Facebook groups, to promote their projects and recruit volunteers (Survey organisations).

The surveyed organisations have recurrently highlighted the inadequacy of the **Online Language System** (OLS), part of the EU Academy in effectively facilitating volunteer language learning. Despite the OLS, some host organisations continue to offer in-person language lessons, albeit at an additional organisational cost. They consider these lessons as essential for providing more practical language instruction than what the online tool is able to offer. Furthermore, they emphasise the positive group dynamic that arises when multiple ESC volunteers participate in the same language class (Survey organisations).

Another short-coming in the management support tools is the absence of a mechanism for providing feedback to partner organisations. Certain organisations have dispatched volunteers to foreign organisations but some of these receiving organisations abroad appear to fall short in adequately welcoming and orienting volunteers. Currently, there is no organised method for providing feedback to these partner organisations.

Another recurrent suggestion is to diversify the application process for Solidarity projects. As this action is meant to be especially accessible and inclusive, some representatives of organisations suggest there should be multiple ways of application. Many young people have great ideas, but are turned off by the application module and its questions. Providing alternatives which are less administratively heavy could foster the application of projects by young people themselves. For example if they could present their project in a video or if they could present the project orally for a jury (Survey organisations).

Apart from the difficulties and shortcomings, stakeholders also notice positive evolutions in the management support tools (Survey organisations ; Interviews NA). The final reports are less extensive than before. The Quality Label for ESC organisations is enthusiastically welcomed by organisations and by the staff of the NA. The stakeholders are convinced that this can lead to more qualitative projects with less administrative burden. One representative of a beneficiary organisation that has been involved in EVS and ESC for over 20 years says that the Quality Label finally is a step towards real administrative simplification (Survey organisations).

The staff of the NA reports that, from their perspective, the IT tools for the MFF 2021-2027 have been one of the most significant challenges for both staff and beneficiaries to manage. As in the previous MFF, they are built while the programmes are being implemented. This has led to numerous problems: postponed deadlines, slow working IT tools to the extent that average tasks takes up much longer than under the MFF 2014-2020, dashboards that partially could not report on the indicators or had mistakes in them that could not be fixed timely for the yearly reporting. Also for the NA, the administrative workload has increased exponentially as working in the Project Management tool (PMM) requires many more steps than under the previous system (EPLUSLINK) (Interviews staff NA ; Additional points NA).

At the start of 2021, management of applications was a real problem within the programme management tools. Even though it has improved since then, it remains an issue with smaller or bigger problems each deadline, such as project organisers that cannot apply due to technical issues, applications being 'lost' or arriving late for management, etc. It is pointed out that final reports became available in the Mobility Tool but also could not be

processed in the Project Management Tool and/or the assessment tools. This has led to late finalisations and late payments to beneficiaries. One of the key tasks of the NA in this process next to just handling the reports was management of the expectations and complaints of beneficiaries as they could not receive the final payment of the project due to the non-functioning of the system (Additional point NA).

The whole situation of the IT-issues required a high level of stress-management for NA staff as they were first in line in contact with beneficiaries and at the same time were frustrated themselves over the non-functioning tools especially PMM and the Beneficiary Module in the first 2,5 years of the programme. The situation had also management repercussions as extra steps have to be dealt with inside the different tools. In addition, additional staff had to be hired to deal with the large influx of final reports in autumn 2023. The situation around the IT-problems for final reports has stabilised since October 2023 although some essential functions were only implemented by the end of the year (Additional point NA).

The IT-non/malfunctioning has impacted the performance indicators for the NA and the programme, it has impacted staff and their well-being, management costs increased but most importantly it has had an impact on the way the European Programmes are viewed as bureaucratic and not easy to apply for or to work with.

9.2. The Youthpass

Although not directly referred to in the question, conversations on management support tools soon led to the use of the European Youthpass (Surveyed organisations; Interviews NA). Striking here are the very different views on the usefulness of the Youthpass among the surveyed representatives of beneficiary organisations and among the staff members of the National Agency.

Youthpass is a recognition instrument for identifying and documenting learning outcomes that are acquired in projects under the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes (European Commission, 2024). Every project participant gets a certificate with the project name, date ... The participants can fill in themselves on which competences they worked, within the framework of eight key competences (Multi-lingual competence; Personal, social and learning to learn competence; Citizenship competence; Entrepreneurship competence; Cultural awareness and expression competence; Digital competence; Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; Literacy competence).

Concerning the technical side, the organisations representatives agree that the Youthpass is easy and fast to generate. Also there are manuals available on how to use the Youthpass that are user friendly. Considering the usefulness of the Youthpass itself, there is more variation in opinions and experiences (Survey organisations).

The respondents from the organisational survey that are positive about the Youthpass, stress the importance of having an instrument that captures the impact on individual

volunteers. Some ESC participants add the Youthpass to their CV. Possibly, the Youthpass is used more for this kind of reasons among YPFO, that often had fewer experience with volunteering or youth work than people from a more middle class background. In contrast, youth workers with official degrees in for example social work, education etc. and/or possessing a youth work certification are less using the Youthpass and do not perceive it as adding value.

“We work specifically with people of colour, and we sometimes see how for this target group it is sometimes the first time they can be part of a co-participatory project. Because they don't feel reflected by student-clubs and they were not taking part in organised youth work. And now, for the first time, they can get into a project where you can informally gain skills that are very diverse. You can learn a lot, and for them it is very valuable to show this: that they have learned a lot in a different context, and not necessarily just with a diploma. Because often intersectional difficulties make the road to a diploma sometimes more bumpy, or they combine it with work. Then it's kind of nice to have... two people we've had now said they liked the fact that they can demonstrate their experience in that sector by the Youthpass.” (Survey organisations, own translation)

Beside the above-cited positive example, there are a few critical arguments. There is generally doubt if the Youthpass has a positive effect when added on the CV. Possibly this is more the case in other countries than in Belgium, where the Youthpass seems to be little known (Survey organisations; Interviews NA).

Furthermore, some argue that the key competences are often not relevant for what is learned during a project. For example not many projects have clear outcomes on the mathematical key competence. This can lead to people just writing down something unfounded. On the other hand, certain competences, such as ‘working in a team’ or ‘loyalty’ are crucial in many ESC projects but are not clearly reflected by the key competences (Survey organisations).

Also the Youthpass is hardly comprehensible for certain target groups. Because of the form, or because of applied terminology. Especially target groups with fewer opportunities, and notably people with a mental disability may experience the Youthpass as inaccessible. Some organisations try to compensate this by applying their own recognition instrument, or for example by individual talks with every project participant (Survey organisations).

Representatives of organisations pointed at the difference between long-term ESC projects and short term projects. Especially in short term projects the Youthpass is sometimes more experienced as a burden than as a joy.

Overall, there seems to be an agreement between different stakeholders that there is a lot of potential in the Youthpass, but there should be more flexibility in how to apply it (Survey organisations; Interviews NA).

10. Societal changes

How many and what types of positive societal changes have been induced by the programmes at national level?

The ESC projects are very diverse. Some voluntary projects allow young people to help in a bird sanctuary, while other volunteers would organise music festivals or European exchanges. As a result, the societal impacts cannot be counted and compared in a standardised way.

One recurrent societal change fuelled by ESC is the emancipation of young people (Interviews NA, survey organisations).

Members of project teams evaluate that the ESC projects contribute to fostering a more inclusive society (see for example Table 3 and Table 10). Surveyed organisations testify how they have adjusted their daily operations to accommodate people with disabilities, thanks to ESC and Erasmus+ Youth activities and projects. Another organisation found that ESC enabled them to engage disadvantaged young people in their activities by providing them with international experiences. A recurring concern among participating organisations is the lack of sufficient resources to provide ongoing support to these young people after the project. Ideally, they would receive coaching to assume further roles in civil society, but there is currently no structured method for accomplishing this. In practice, organisations may lose track of the trajectory of these young people after their involvement in ESC (Survey organisations).

11. ESC type of activities, number of organisations

Based on assessment, is the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 perceived as a programme about the learning dimension of young people or more on addressing societal changes? To what extent is it both? What type of activities are offered to young volunteers and participants in solidarity projects? What are the predominant types of participating organisations: volunteering or youth organisations? Has the number of volunteering organisations involved in the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps programme increased compared to the European Voluntary Service (EVS)? What about 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme compared to EVS?

A round-up of different stakeholders each time points to the same answer: for the involved organisations the priority of ESC is on the learning dimension of the individual volunteers. Addressing societal changes ranks second in priority, with both objectives being deemed important. However, the concrete realisation of these objectives varies significantly from project to project.

In terms of the thematic priorities addresses by the ESC projects, the most selected EU Youth Goals across the 161 successful ESC projects awarded between 2021 and 2023,

encompassing 107 ESC51 volunteering initiatives and 54 ESC30 solidarity projects, are as follows: Inclusive Societies (106 projects), Youth Organisations & European Programmes (84 projects), and Space and Participation for All (78 projects) (see Table 11 for details).

During 2021-2023 there were 95 distinct organisations that have been awarded one or several ESC projects (see Table 11). For the period 2018-2020 there were 100 distinct awarded organisations (www.jint.be/subsidieresultaten). Participating organisations are both youth organisations (e.g. accredited national youth work associations) as well as a wide range of other non-profit organisations offering volunteering opportunities to young people (Interviews NA).

12. ESC for people with fewer opportunities

To what extent is the design of European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 oriented and focused towards people with fewer opportunities? What factors are limiting their access and what actions could be taken to remedy this?

12.1. People with fewer opportunities in the context of the Flemish Community

According to the EU regulation, *particular attention should be paid to ensuring that solidarity activities are accessible to all young people, and in particular young people with fewer opportunities. Special measures should be put in place to promote social inclusion and, in particular, the participation of disadvantaged young people, including the provision of reasonable accommodation to enable people with disabilities to effectively participate in solidarity activities* (Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 Establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme and Repealing Regulations (EU) 2018/1475 and (EU) No 375/2014 (Text with EEA Relevance), 2021).

In the context of the Flemish Community, we identify three primary groups of individuals facing fewer opportunities, which are pertinent to the EU Youth Programmes. These classifications are derived from interviews conducted with the NA, the NAU, and notably, the feedback provided by beneficiary organisations during the organisational survey.

Firstly, there are disadvantaged young people who encounter social exclusion, often stemming from financial poverty and/or precarious family situations. Secondly, there are individuals who have migrated to Belgium and do not have full citizenship (yet). Thirdly, there are individuals with mental and physical disabilities. Several organisations that subscribe to EU Youth Programmes appear to have a lot of experience and expertise in working with people with disabilities.

It is important to note the vast diversity within and between these groups, with varying needs and opportunities across individuals. Additionally, there may be other relevant groups falling under the definition of 'people with fewer opportunities,' but they may not have been discussed or mentioned during the data collection for this report.

12.2. The involvement of young people with fewer opportunities in ESC

Data from the previous years shows that ESC effectively reaches out to YPFO. Data from the dashboard shows that between 2018, when ESC came into existence, and 2020, there were 898 participants in awarded projects, of which seven had special needs and 253 had fewer opportunities (Table 1). In that period, a distinction was made between 'people with special

needs' and 'people with fewer opportunities'. From 2021, this was no longer the case; both groups fall under 'people with fewer opportunities'. During 2021-2023 the dashboard shows that there were 939 awarded participants, of which 300 with fewer opportunities (Table 2).

Between 2018 and 2020, 29% of all ESC participants had special needs or had fewer opportunities, while in 2021 and 2023 this number raised to 30% (Table 1 and Table 2). Yet, this figure is distorted because registered participants in solidarity projects could not register as FO, whereas quite likely the rate of YPFO is rather high among the participants in solidarity projects.

If we only look into volunteering activities, for the period 2018-2020, 40,94% of all awarded participants are YPFO. For the period 2021-2023, the YPFO participation rate has climbed to 46,66%.

Generally, it is clear that ESC does engage with YPFO, perhaps to a greater extent than Erasmus+ Youth projects. However, there is certainly room for further improvement in this regard.

12.3. People with fewer opportunities as participants

Disadvantaged young people

International youth work is relatively little known in general, and this is definitely the case for young people with fewer opportunities (Pots, 2023, p. 3). To inform these young people is a first important step. The young people should be aware about the opportunities, and as several organisation representatives stress, also believe that they are actually a possible target group (Surveyed organisations). Some beneficiary organisations work (almost) exclusively for YPFO. For them it clear how to inform and invite participants with fewer opportunities. Other organisations are less familiar with those target groups. Establishing partnerships is a good practice here (and often more realistic than trying to reach out to young people with fewer opportunities without the appropriate expertise and networks). Of course such processes take time and energy.

Also the preparation process may ask some additional efforts. Young people from disadvantaged background are not always used to travel. For some of the participants it may be the first time going abroad or to take a plane. There is a need for tailored support (Pots, 2023) (Survey organisations).

Limited resident permits

Several organisations have identified travel restrictions, primarily due to legal status, as a significant barrier to accessing ESC projects and activities that involve cross-border mobility (Survey organisations). These challenges become particularly evident when attempting to involve young individuals with limited residence permits or non-Schengen passports. The process of applying for necessary documents is often lengthy and has a uncertain outcome ((Pots, 2023) ; Survey organisations). Not getting the necessarily travel

documents may of course lead to disappointment, and to reluctance to future participation.

Disability

For some beneficiary organisations, projects with young people with disabilities are at the core of their international activities.

A main factor limiting the access of young people with a mental disability is the age requirement. People with a mental disability are often older than 30 years old before they are ready to engage in international projects.

“Not many people with a mental disability come to us before the age of 25. So for them, just not living with their mum and dad anymore is already such a big step, you shouldn't then start sending them to Estonia for a few weeks. It's actually already fantastic if they are getting to know the local garden and dare to take the bus on their own. And we've seen many times that by the time people are ready to have that look outside their own country, they are at least 35, if not already 40. And when they are 50 you have to stop already, because then they can't handle it physically. But I have been bumped many times, I know several people where I would so say "go somewhere for a month or for two months", but they won't make it before they are 30, really.” (Participant survey organisations, own translation)

12.4. People with fewer opportunities as project organisers

While there are considerable barriers for participation in ESC projects, the bigger challenge is to make ESC accessible for project organisers in general and for organisers with fewer opportunities in particular. Getting the information about ESC to the concerned people is a challenge, as discussed in the parts on the limiting factor for participants and for the inclusion strategy.

Writing a project is quite time-consuming. The help of experienced people is necessary. JINT's Supportive Approach (including information sessions, specific support for YPFO organisations and administrative support) offers a certain assistance, but some organisers that are not familiar with project applications need more intense guidance, at least for a first time. The surveyed organisations see positive opportunities from obtaining a Quality Label. One condition for obtaining a Quality Label is that the accredited organisations, typically more experienced entities, provide support to smaller, informal organisations focused towards and sometimes run by YPFO.

Many respondents stress that the programme actions that are supposed to be accessible are in fact not accessible, mostly due to the administrative burden, starting from the application form (Interviews NA).

Young people might have an idea for a project, e.g. a Solidarity project, but they do not understand the questions in the application form. They are not familiar with the applied terminology.

Also, the NA recognises those factors limiting the access. They sometimes criticise the fact that the application process for small scale projects and activities that are supposed to be accessible is the same as for more complex and expensive projects.

“The contractual terms for a €5,000 grant are identical to those for a €400,000 grant, which is disproportionate and unacceptable. Furthermore, there are numerous issues, such as IT failures and excessive thresholds in participant and organisation registration, which are also disproportionate to the level of subsidies.” (Respondent Interviews NA, own translation)

12.5. Actions to remedy the limited access

- Provide more budget for ‘exceptional costs’ as the current measures are useful but not always enough. E.g. when engaging YPFO it is not always possible to buy travel tickets much in advance. This may lead to higher mobility costs (Survey organisations, Interviews NA).
- Provide user-friendly tools that work. The Application module, the European Youth Portal and the Beneficiary module are not perceived as user-friendly or even as functional (Pots, 2023).
- Consider short-term projects, such as solidarity projects and volunteer teams, as a stepping stone to internationalisation and possibly other actions with ESC or Erasmus+ Youth (Survey organisations, Interviews NA). This includes additional support to further follow-up and to keep the young people involved in a short-term project engaged.
- Address potential issues with residence permits and visas. A clearer statute, official letters of support from the European Commission and increased awareness of the European Youth projects at embassies and foreign affairs departments could help a lot (Survey organisations; Interviews NA ; (Pots, 2023, p. 8)).
- Reconsider age limits, especially for YPFO. Although there is much understanding for ESC to be a Youth Programme, the age-limits are often problematic when working with YPFO. Individuals with disabilities often reach over 30 years old by the time they are prepared to participate in an international project. Additionally, NEET youths may sometimes be underage (Survey organisations, Interviews NA).
- Instead of expecting individual organisations working with YPFO to apply for and manage the whole project cycle, it could be more realistic to invest also through funding in organisations that already have the necessary expertise and that can support YPFO organisations or organise and follow up on the whole. The current financial assistance provided for this purpose is considered inadequate (Survey organisations, Interviews NA).

13. Complementarity to other available programmes

To what extent have the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 been coherent with various interventions pursued at national level which have similar objectives? To what extent have European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 proved to be complementary to other Member States' interventions/initiatives in the field of volunteering in support of humanitarian aid and in the field of youth?

The national funding for internationalisation in the youth sector has been phased down, mostly due to the success of the EU Youth Programmes (Stevens, 2017) (Interviews NA; Interview NAU).

The only obvious programme that is complementary is the Bel'J programme. This is a cooperation between the Flemish, French and German speaking Communities in Belgium for exchanges, trainings and volunteering in another language Community. The Bel'J program is designed complementary with ESC (and Erasmus+ Youth). Three possible actions within Bel'J are exchanges, training of youth workers and voluntary work. In every Community an agency has been appointed to implement the Bel'J programme. It is the task of that Agency to disseminate information, liaise with the organisations involved, support young people and handle administrative and financial formalities. The national agencies are the same ones as for the EU-Youth Programmes, e.g. JINT for the Flemish Community (Interviews NA; Interview NAU).

14. Additional value

What is the additional value and benefit resulting from EU activities, compared to what could be achieved by Member States at national and/or regional levels? What did the European Solidarity Corps programme 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 offer in addition to other education and training support or solidarity schemes available at national level?

To provide elements of an answer to the above question, we asked the surveyed organisations what their motivation was to apply for grants from the ESC programme.

The respondents testify how ESC offers a range of possibilities for solidarity at different levels: from projects in the own street to transnational cooperation.

The European, or international dimension, is very important to them. The ESC projects take young people out of their comfort zone. Exchanging with people from different countries and cultures can lead to innovative approaches and insights. Young people with fewer opportunities often do not have many opportunities for internationalisation. For young people with a migration background, ESC can provide a framework to learn about the countries of their ancestors in a more nuanced and in-depth way. For example, by going on a teamvolunteering with partners in Italy, Morocco or Turkey. This is a terrific addition to their development (Survey organisations).

One survey respondent points at the acknowledgement that ESC gives to international exchange. Probably the organisation would organise volunteering abroad anyway, but ESC provides a framework and a follow-up that adds to the accessibility and quality of solidarity actions (Survey organisations).

The EU Youth Programmes appear to be distinctive in this aspect, as surveyed organisations do not mention similar or alternative project opportunities at the national level. The Bel'J programme in Belgium is complementary with the EU Youth Programmes, as it focusses on exchanges, volunteering and trainings between Belgium's different language communities (Interviews NA, Interviews NAU).

15. ESC vs. EVS

What is the benefit and added value of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 compared to the benefit of the European Voluntary Service?

One cited benefit of ESC compared to EVS concerns long-time individual voluntary work. Before, in EVS-times, organisations and volunteers had to know each other before applying for EVS. They then wrote a specific file together for that person, in that place, in that period.

Since ESC, organisations can apply for ESC without knowing which volunteer they will host. Since 2021, when applying for a Quality Label they present their philosophy, their mission, their motivation to welcome volunteers, the objectives they want to reach etc. When the Quality Label gets awarded they can apply for grants and can start looking for incoming/outgoing volunteers. This system makes ESC more accessible for organisations (Interviews NA).

Another cited advantage are the solidarity projects as part of the ESC programme. A solidarity project is an initiative involving a minimum of five people aimed at fostering positive change within the local community. It is set up and implemented by young people themselves in a place where they live. This ESC action offers a new way to involve young people in the EU Youth Programmes, also those that would not be immediately attracted by actions that involve going abroad (Interviews NA; Survey organisations).

16. ESC as a stand-alone programme

What would be the most likely consequences of stopping the European Solidarity Corps programme as a stand-alone programme?

Before 2018, EVS was an initiative within the overarching Erasmus+ programme under the MFF 2014-2020, as well as the preceding program periods. In 2018 ESC came into existence as a stand-alone programme and remained a stand-alone EU Youth Programme under the MFF 2021-2027.

According to the staff members of the NA and the NAU, the fact that ESC is now a stand-alone programme has both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that ESC now stands as a distinct programme dedicated to the youth sector. This grants it a unique status and serves as a specific instrument at both European and national levels within the youth domain.

One disadvantage is that ESC is considerably smaller in scope compared to Erasmus+, which encompasses the EU's backing of education, training, and sport in addition to youth. Erasmus+ 2021-2027 has an estimated budget of €26,2 billion versus €1,009 billion for ESC (Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 Establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme and Repealing Regulations (EU) 2018/1475 and (EU) No 375/2014 (Text with EEA Relevance), 2021). While the budget for Erasmus+ is growing, this is hardly the case for ESC. In quite some European countries and on the European level, youth work is perceived as the lesser and lower-priority counterpart to education.

Having a distinct Programme Committee for ESC preserves the opportunity for tailored input from youth ministers, a valuable aspect that most likely would be compromised if the ESC were amalgamated into Erasmus+, dominated by education ministers and by the educational perspective (Interviews NA; Interview NAU).

It is not clear to us whether keeping ESC as a stand-alone programme is efficient or not.

For organisations in the field and for the general public, ESC and Erasmus+ Youth seem to be part of the same programme. While conducting the survey of organisations, the majority of respondents did not naturally differentiate between ESC and Erasmus+ Youth projects. Even when prompted, they often found it challenging to discern whether a particular project belonged to ESC or Erasmus+ Youth. For instance, activities such as group exchanges (under Erasmus+ Youth) and voluntary teams (under ESC) often appeared quite similar in practice. The history of EVS being a part of Erasmus+, as well as the fact that JINT promotes the two EU Youth Programmes in an integrated manner, may contribute to the blurring of the distinction (Additional point NA).

17. Replacement

Are there national schemes that could effectively replace the European Solidarity Corps if no funding is allocated in the future?

There are no national schemes that could effectively replace the ESC (Interviews NA; Interview National Authority).

As became clear in previous studies (Stevens, 2017) the national funds for the internationalisation of the youth sector have been phased down, partially due to the success of the previous and current ESC and Erasmus+ Youth Programmes.

Bel'J, makes exchanges, training and volunteering work possible but is limited to the three Belgian Communities. This programme is complementary to the architecture of ESC, and has been designed to be so.

V. Conclusions

Below, we delve into the conclusions based on the five evaluation criteria and the standard questions proposed by the European Commission (see Table 12).

Effectiveness (Q1 – Q4)

ESC is a robust programme that offers a broad range of possibilities to youth work and volunteering. Its main activities include Volunteering and solidarity projects. Volunteering activities can be carried out individually for a duration of 2 to 12 months, or in volunteer teams lasting from 2 weeks to 2 months. Typically, for Volunteering projects participants travel abroad, while solidarity projects are conducted within the local communities of the organising youth. Additionally, the NA offers Training and Network activities for the youth sector to ensure the quality implementation of the ESC.

For obvious reasons, the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on the implementation of the ESC programme. However, the support of the NA and the resilience of youth work and volunteering organisations limited the impact, often requiring adaptations, resulting in a limited number of cancelled projects or volunteers unable to realise their projects (Q1). After the pandemic period, there has been a sharp increase in project application numbers.

The success rate of submitted projects is quite high (over 80%). Yet, promising projects got refused or downscaled by the NA because of the insufficient budget for the current demand (Q1). This somehow conflicts with the shared ambition to make the program more known and more inclusive. Inclusion is generally an important theme within ESC projects that has been put to the front as a priority by the European Commission and that also resonates with the applying organisations concern and the NA objectives (Q1). This is also reflected in the rather high proportion of YPFO in the participant numbers. YPFO usually have less opportunities for internationalisation than other young people, especially for them, ESC opens opportunities (Q2). Age restrictions, residency permit conditions, the complexity of the application process and a general lack of familiarity with the programme are hindering inclusion efforts.

There is an impression that promoting short-term activities could be a means to foster inclusion since they are easier to organise for individuals, including YPFO facing specific barriers or contributing to household income. However, stakeholders from organisations and the NA also stress the benefits of long-term ESC projects and emphasize that the European Commission's promotion of short-term activities should not be solely motivated by cost-saving measures (Q3).

The effects of ESC after the intervention are not measured in a structured way. Yet, there are signs that there is such a lasting effect. Insights from surveyed organisations highlight the long-term impacts of ESC on participants, emphasising ESC's role in broadening horizons, fostering cultural understanding and promoting solidarity. Connections made, topics addressed, and partnerships formed shape the organisations policies and activities.

Sometimes ESC has become integral to their policy and mission as a means for internationalisation (Q4).

Efficiency (Q5-Q9)

Since 2023, the budget requests for volunteering have consistently exceeded the available budget (Q5). The stagnant budget forecast hinders ESC from reaching its full potential by limiting the allocation of additional projects and involvement of more volunteers, including YPFO (Q5). The NA is able to absorb the available financial resources but has to downsize and refuse projects (Q6). The requested budget for 2023 was 169,16% of the available budget for projects, especially for volunteering this created in a much lower number of volunteers granted than the organisations had requested.

For the projects that get funded, there are some concerns about the (in)sufficiency of the budget. Organisations hosting volunteers do not always get by with the budgets provided by the ESC programme (Q5). The participants themselves usually consider their participation as affordable, but among YPFO this sentiment is less pronounced (Q5).

The DCYM is the NAU for ESC in Flanders and Brussels, overseeing implementation and reporting to the European Commission. JINT vzw manages ESC actions, bridging between organisations and the European Commission. JINT clarifies complex policies to (potential) beneficiaries, making ESC participation more accessible (Q8). The NA JINT is a crucial intermediate structure enabling ESC activities to take place. JINT also utilizes subsidies to support youth organisations to apply for ESC funding, though limited budgets from the European Commission restrict ESC's potential in Flanders and Brussels (Q8).

In order to efficiently streamline administrative processes, several support tools have been developed by the EC. Overall, there are several recurring issues with the ESC management support tools, including technical glitches and user-unfriendliness, which have worsened over time (Q9). Almost all surveyed organisations express frustration due to these malfunctions hindering necessary tasks. The NA offers necessary support, but the power to make substantial changes to the IT tools lies with the European Commission. Stakeholders also express doubts about the effectiveness of the Youth Portal and the Online Language System, and some highlight the absence of a feedback mechanism for partner organisations. Suggestions include diversifying the application process for solidarity projects and providing alternatives to the administratively heavy application module (Q9). Despite these difficulties, stakeholders also notice positive evolutions in the management support tools, such as less extensive final reports and – especially- the introduction of a Quality Label for ESC organisations. However, challenges with IT tools persist, leading to postponed deadlines for the NA, slow working tools, and increased administrative workload for both NA staff and beneficiaries. The IT issues have impacted performance indicators, NA's staff well-being, and the perception of European Programs as bureaucratic.

The Youthpass tool is perceived positively by some organisations for its ease of generation and the fact that it attempts to register and validate the learning outcomes of volunteers,

while others question its effectiveness, especially regarding its influence on CVs and the relevance of the key competences. Additionally, certain target groups, such as those with mental disabilities, may find the Youthpass inaccessible. Despite varying opinions, stakeholders generally agree on the potential of the Youthpass but emphasise the need for more flexibility in its application (Q9).

Relevance (Q10-Q12)

ESC projects encompass diverse activities contributing to societal changes like youth empowerment and inclusivity, in various degrees. Participating organisations may adapt their general operations to accommodate YPFO. There is some concern about the lack of resources for ongoing support for volunteers after the end of the ESC project or activity (Q10).

Over 2021-2023, 95 distinct organizations were awarded ESC projects, compared to 100 in 2018-2020, spanning both youth and voluntary organisations (Q11). Stakeholders consistently prioritise the learning dimension of individual volunteers in ESC projects, with societal changes ranking second. However, the achievement of learning outcomes for young people or societal changes varies among projects (Q11).

In the Flemish context, we identify three primary groups of individuals facing FO, which are pertinent to the ESC programme: disadvantaged young people who encounter social exclusion, individuals who have migrated to Belgium and do not have full citizenship and individuals with mental or physical disabilities (Q12). It is widely acknowledged by various stakeholders that ESC presents opportunities for these diverse groups, and participants numbers show already a significant share of YPFO. However, there is still room for improvement. Challenges such as age limits, residency permits, and application complexity hinder inclusion efforts (Q12).

Coherence (Q13)

National funding for youth internationalisation has almost disappeared due to the success of EU Youth Programmes, with the Bel'J programme serving as the primary complementary initiative alongside ESC (Q13-Q14-Q17)).

European added value (Q14-Q17)

Beneficiary organisations perceive ESC projects as transformative experiences, especially for young participants, while also offering opportunities for organisational development (Q14).

Before 2018, EVS was part of the broader Erasmus+ program, but ESC emerged as a standalone initiative in 2018. ESC's autonomy as a Youth Programme within European policy, offers specific advantages, yet its smaller budget compared to Erasmus+ presents challenges. While ESC benefits from tailored input through its Program Committee, distinguishing between ESC and Erasmus+ Youth projects remains unclear for many organisations and the public, potentially due to mixed promotional strategies (Q16).

One cited advantage of ESC over EVS involves the flexibility in setting up individual volunteering projects, where organisations no longer need to pre-select volunteers at the time of project application, but can apply based on their mission and objectives. Another major benefit lies in solidarity projects, fostering positive change within local communities and engaging young people who may not be drawn by international actions (Q15).

VI. Suggestions

Suggestions to the European Commission

- To develop a growth path for the ESC budget, in order to adequately meet the needs of current ESC Quality Label organisations in terms of their volunteering projects, as well as to allow the ESC programme to increase its full potential by reaching out to new beneficiaries and to provide more support, in particular to YPFO.
- Adapt the administrative burden, especially for the actions that are supposed to be accessible such as the Solidarity projects. The administration, including application form, contracts, guidelines... is not sufficiently adapted to the young target group.
 - o It is recommended that the administration of a smaller scale project is not bound by the same rules and procedures as other, more extensive EU projects. The proportionality principle should be reflected here. Applying the same rules and procedures for smaller and bigger projects significantly reduces the accessibility of the ESC Programme. An alternative could be to install a minimis rule, so that projects under a certain amount are exempted from certain requirements.
 - o Contracts between beneficiaries and the NA should be proportional to the size of the project and should be understandable for the beneficiaries within the concerned actions.
 - o Regarding the Solidarity projects, alternative methods of project application should be considered, such as allowing young people to present their initial project ideas through a video or in-person presentation.
 - o Simplified funding rules based on unit costs and lump sum models have received a positive reception from beneficiary organisations and represent a path to pursue further.
- Further simplify the administrative burden and -especially- solve the technical problems with the IT tools. Organisations are put off by this. The Youth portal is not perceived as user-friendly or even as functional.
- To foster inclusion by the facilitation of YPFO participation, the ESC programme needs to foresee a financial approach that can be tailored were needed on the organisational level as well as in the direct support for YPFO. Although the system of exceptional costs is useful, it does not always suffice to adequately cover the additional expenses related to engaging YPFO.

- Consider short-term projects as a stepping stone to internationalisation and possibly other actions with ESC or Erasmus+ Youth. This includes additional support to further follow-up and keep the young people involved in a short-term project engaged after the project.
- To provide adequate support to long-term volunteering opportunities, in recognition of its high impact on individual learning and higher benefits for organisations compared to short-term volunteering.
- To foster inclusion by the facilitation of YPFO participation it is recommended to develop a strategy to address potential issues with residence permits and visas. A clearer statute, official letters of support from the European Commission and increased awareness of the European Youth projects at embassies and foreign affairs departments could be helpful.
- Consider revising age limits to foster inclusion through facilitating YPFO participation. Although there is much understanding for ESC to be a Youth Programme, the age-limits are often problematic when working with particular categories of YPFO. People with a mental disability are often over 30 years old when they would be ready to engage in an international project. For young people that are NEET the minimum age of 18 can be an obstacle.
- To intensify support to the monitoring of the ESC:
 - o By increasing efforts to collect valid and complete data on relevant indicators across all program actions.
 - o by equipping the NA and NAU with well-functioning, reliable monitoring systems (EC Dashboards) attending the NAs and NAUs data monitoring needs.
 - o To embrace and support the NA network's complementary initiatives to monitor the effects and impact of the ESC via the RAY network
 - o By setting clear indicators that are measurable and in line with the budget and budgetary rules of the programme.
 - o To develop a monitoring approach where measurement of indicators is not restricted to those project activities and participants to which funding is attributed. This budget-driven approach proves to be limiting and distorting a clear picture. For some indicators, such as those related to YPFO, a more content-oriented monitoring approach would offer a clear and complete picture.
- To foster the indirect management system for ESC, and to strengthen NAs in fulfilling their position as intermediate support structure, among others by

equipping them with adequate resources to develop their supportive approach to beneficiaries, as well as networking and training activities for volunteers and Quality Label organisations in the ESC.

- Recognise and ensure the coherence between the two programs, ESC and Erasmus+ Youth. A separate approach stands in contradiction to their integrated nature in implementation in practice. Typically, beneficiaries do not distinguish between the programmes in conversations, as both are seen as integral components of the same framework. Furthermore, distinguishing between them in data and numerical analysis poses challenges, especially considering that certain ESC initiatives were previously existing under the Erasmus+ umbrella. Also staff members of the NA often do not distinguish between actions of the two programmes and rather consider the different actions as belonging to the same tool-box.

Suggestions to the National Agency and the National Authority

- To monitor and support the continued development of the ESC Quality Label. Stakeholders recognise the importance and advantages of working with the Quality Label, including less administrative hassle for beneficiary organisations and the responsibility to promote ESC for other organisations. Organisations with a Quality Label are also able to support YPFO organisations to apply for ESC. This would foster inclusion by the facilitation of YPFO participation.
- The NA JINT plays a crucial role as a mediator between the European Commission and civil society organizations. It's important to ensure transparent communication with these organizations and to carefully time communication efforts. It's recommended to avoid sharing European Commission directives and messages with the sector without first assessing their relevance and providing re-translation and context when needed.
- Extend the strategies for communication with and support of organisations embedded in the local Flemish context, including informal groups, small non-profit organisations, youth organizations that work with many volunteers etc.
- Continue to build and gather expertise as a NA, as this enhances the implementation of the program. Consider less obvious areas such as insurance or residency documents, as these are also topics that concern organisations and (potential) participants.

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VIII. Tables and Figures

Table 1: Overview 2018_2020 ESC - number of projects, budget, number of organisations and participants per Key Action

Key Action	Action	Received projects	Awarded projects	Success rate	Grant Amount Awarded (EUR)	Budget Share (in the respective Youth Program)	Participants in Awarded Projects		
							Total	With SN	With FO
Volunteering (SPV)	Volunteering Projects (ESC11)	119	113	95,0%	€ 3.723.958,57	90,4%	635	7	253
Solidarity projects (SPR)	Solidarity projects (ESC31)	63	48	76,2%	€ 395.134,00	9,6%	263	0	0
TOTAL ESC		182	161	88,5%	€ 4.119.092,57	100,0%	898	7	253

(source: Dashboard)

Table 2: Overview 2021-2023 ESC - action code, number of projects, budget, number of participants

Call Year	Action Code - Name	Submitted Projects	Received Projects	Awarded Projects	Success rate	Awarded Grants (€)	Awarded participants		
							Total	Participant share YPFO	Awarded YPFO
2021	ESC30 – Solidarity projects	8	8	6	75,00%	€51888	33	n.a	
2021	ESC51 – Volunteering projects	29	28	25	89,29%	€1324656	189	44,97%	85
2022	ESC30 – Solidarity projects	24	24	23	95,83%	€226307,8	123	n.a	n.a
2022	ESC51 – Volunteering projects	39	39	36	92,31%	€1358000	190	51,05%	97
2023	ESC30 – Solidarity projects	36	36	25	69,44%	€244425	140	n.a	n.a
2023	ESC51 – Volunteering projects	50	49	46	93,88%	€1768500	264	44,70%	118
ESC 21-23 TOTAL:		186	184	161	85,96%	€ 4.973.777	939		

(source: Dashboard)

Table 3: Contribution to the ESC general objectives according to members of project teams

To what extent did the project contribute to the general objectives of the ESC?	N=59
	N
[to bring together young people and organisations to build a more inclusive society]	42
[to promote social inclusion]	37
[to promote equal opportunities]	35
[to strengthen active citizenship]	33
[to enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in solidarity actions]	31
[to strengthen solidarity]	31
[to support vulnerable people]	26
[to respond to societal and humanitarian challenges]	23
[to strengthen cohesion]	23
[to strengthen European identity]	23
[to strengthen democracy]	19
[to promote sustainable development]	15

(source: RAY SOC 2021_2023 PT Q6)

Table 4: Contribution to the ESC strategic objectives according to members of project teams

In your opinion, to what extent did the project contribute to the strategic objectives of the European Solidarity Corps?	N=59
	N
[to improve the competences of young people]	42
[to provide young people with opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities]	34
[to facilitate the continuous engagement of young people as active citizens]	30
[to induce positive societal change in the European Union and beyond]	16
[to properly validate the competences of young people]	12
[to ensure that such opportunities are easily accessible for all young people]	9
[to encourage cooperation on environmental challenges]	9
[to foster digital literacy and education]	8

(source: RAY SOC 2021_2023 PT Q7)

Table 5: Number of participants ESC BE FL NA based on ESC type and duration

ESC type and duration	Participants 2021-2023	Share in total 2021-2023
Longterm: individual	220	49,77%
Shortterm: individual	60	13,57%
Total individual	280	63,35%
Shortterm: volunteers teams	162	36,65%
Total Shortterm	222	50,23%
Total	442	100,00%

(source: Dashboard)

Table 6: Assessment of sustainability by ESC project team members

In your assessment, how sustainable are the project outcomes?	Frequency	Percent
0 Not at all sustainable	0	0,00%
1	0	0,00%
2	0	0,00%
3	1	2,08%
4	1	2,08%
5	3	6,25%
6	11	22,92%
7	10	20,83%
8	7	14,58%
9	10	20,83%
10 Very sustainable	5	10,42%
Total Q	48	100,00%
Missing	11	
Total dataset	59	

(source: RAY SOC 2021_2023 PT Q72)

Table 7: Adequateness of the project funding according to project team members (n=50)

In your assessment, how adequate was the project funding?		
Categories	N	Percent
0 Not at all	1	2,00%
1	1	2,00%
2	3	6,00%
3	3	6,00%
4	8	16,00%
5	3	6,00%
6	6	12,00%
7	7	14,00%
8	6	12,00%
9	6	12,00%
10 Very adequate	6	12,00%
Total Q	50	100,00%
Missing	9	
Total dataset	59	

(source: RAY SOC 2021_2023 PT Q66)

Table 8: Easiness to afford ESC participation according to participants (n=88)

How easy was it for you to afford participating in the project?	Frequency	Percent
0 not at all easy	0	0,00%
1	0	0,00%
2	2	2,27%
3	5	5,68%
4	3	2,27%
5	3	3,41%
6	8	9,09%
7	10	11,36%
8	10	11,36%
9	20	22,73%
10 very easy	27	30,68%
Total Q	88	100,00%
Missing	8	
Total dataset	96	

(source: RAY SOC 2021_2023 VOL Q65)

Table 9: Easiness to afford ESC participation vs. barriers to achieve full potential (n=85)

Crostabbs “Would you say that you are faced with barriers to achieve your full potential?” by “How easy was it for you to afford participating in the project?” (row percentages, RAY SOC VOL, n=85)

How easy was it for you to afford participating in the project? (on a scale of 0 thru 10)				
		0 thru 5	6 thru 10	Total
Would you say that you are faced with barriers to achieve your full potential?	Yes	9	21	30
		30,00%	70,00%	100,00%
	No	4	51	55
		7,30%	92,70%	100,00%
Total				85

(source: RAY SOC 2021_2023 VOL Q65 & Q88)

Table 10: Youth goals in ESC projects 2021-2023

*ESC30: Solidarity projects – a total of 54 in 2021-2023

**ESC51: Solidarity activities – a total of 107 in 2021-2023

*** Organisers of projects and activities had the option to choose multiple priorities, with an average selection of about three per project/activity.

Call Year	Action Code	1. Connecting EU with Youth	2. Equality of All Genders	3. Inclusive Societies	4. Information & Constructive Dialogue	5. Mental Health & Wellbeing	6. Moving Rural Youth Forward	7. Quality Employment for All	8. Quality Learning	9. Space and Participation for All	10. Sustainable Green Europe	11. Youth Organisations & European Programmes
2021-2023	ESC30 Solidarity projects	-	18	35	5	9	8	15	-	14	7	41
	ESC51 Volunteering activities	-	43	71	43	43	43	43	-	64	41	43
Total			61	106	48	52	51	58	0	78	48	84

(source: Dashboard)

Table 11: Applications of organisations E+ and ESC 2021-2023

E+	Organisation Name	Role	Awarded Organisations	Distinct Organisations
	Partner Organisation - Other Country		978	637
	Applicant Organisation		254	139
	Partner Organisation - National		71	58
ESC	Applicant Organisation		161	95

(source: Dashboard)

Table 12: The questions from the EC's guidance note with indication of the questions addressed in the evaluation report

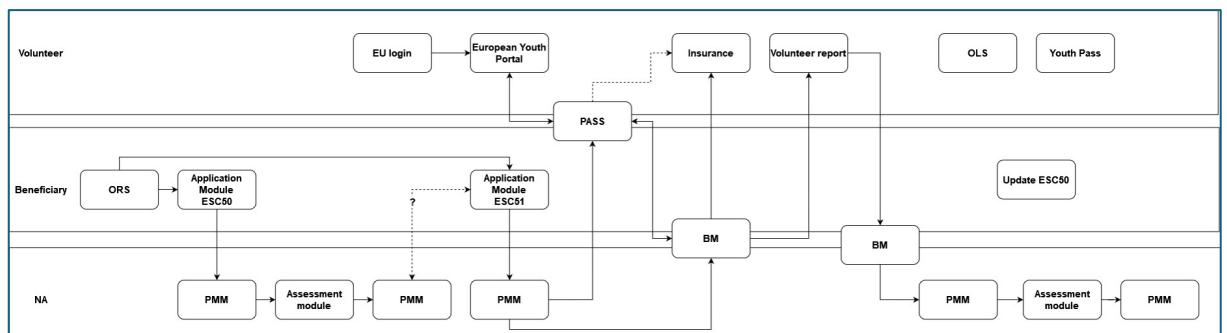
<i>Evaluation Questions per evaluation criterium</i>	<i>Question in report</i>
<i>Effectiveness</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have the three programmes European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 delivered the expected outputs, results and impacts? What negative and positive factors seem to be influencing outputs, results and impacts? We are interested in the impact of all elements of the two programmes. We are also interested in the impact of elements that have been discontinued between the period 2018-2020 and the period 2021-2027 of European Solidarity Corps and/or the European Voluntary Service to the extent that it might help to design the future programme. 	1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With regard to the inclusion priority, what are the main concrete impacts of the European Solidarity Corps programmes 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 on the participants who are young people with fewer opportunities? 	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What have been the unintended effects and their magnitude of European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020, if any? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With regard to European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027, what can be done in order to increase the number of participants in short-term activities (e.g. volunteering teams and solidarity projects) and, 	3

as a consequence, the number of participants in the whole Programme?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are the effects of the solidarity activities likely to last, for both participants and local communities, after the end of the intervention? 	4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are the programmes' results adequately disseminated and exploited? 	
Efficiency	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the cost-effectiveness of the various operational actions of European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the cost-effectiveness of the quality support measures (training and evaluation measures, inclusion, online linguistic support, etc.)? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is/was the size of budget and the funding models appropriate and proportionate to what European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 set out to achieve? 	5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What were the financial absorption levels across National Agencies? Has the target number of participants in solidarity activities been achieved? 	6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent has the portal replaced the functions of supporting organisations? Are there any duplications between the portal functions and the role of supporting organisations? 	7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is the implementation of actions in indirect management appropriate, efficient, and well-functioning? How efficient is the cooperation between the European Commission and National Agencies, and to what extent does the European Commission fulfil its guiding role in the process? How has this evolved over time? What are the areas for improvements? 	8
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are the monitoring mechanisms applied by the National Agencies efficient/cost effective? What are the areas for improvement, considering the need for a smooth and effective implementation of the programme? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are the management support tools (e.g. E+ Link, eForms, Mobility Tool, Lifecard NAM, Youth Portal, PMM, BM, Application Forms, EU Academy, eGrants) adequate and sufficient to support a sound management of the programme? 	9

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have the anti-fraud measures allowed for the prevention and timely detection of fraud? 	
Relevance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many and what types of positive societal changes have been induced by the programmes at national level? 	10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on assessment, is the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 perceived as a programme about the learning dimension of young people or more on addressing societal changes? To what extent is it both? What type of activities are offered to young volunteers and participants in solidarity projects? What are the predominant types of participating organisations: volunteering or youth organisations? Has the number of volunteering organisations involved in the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps programme increased compared to the European Voluntary Service (EVS)? What about 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme compared to EVS? 	11
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is the design of European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 oriented and focused towards people with fewer opportunities? What factors are limiting their access and what actions could be taken to remedy this? 	12
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the analysis of the impact of European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020, are there any elements that have been discontinued (i.e. are not included in European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027) and could have a possible value added in future generation of the European Solidarity Corps programme? 	
Coherence	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent has the action “Volunteering in high priority areas” complemented and added value to the indirect management volunteering projects? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 been coherent with relevant EU programmes with similar objectives such as Erasmus+, Cohesion policy programmes funded under ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus) and/or ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), Horizon Europe? To what extent have European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 proved complementary to other EU interventions/initiatives in the fields of youth? 	13

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 been coherent with various interventions pursued at national level which have similar objectives? To what extent have European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 proved to be complementary to other Member States' interventions/initiatives in the field of volunteering in support of humanitarian aid and in the field of youth? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do programme priorities reflect the expectations of the society? Is it effective to update priorities every year? 	
European added value	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the additional value and benefit resulting from EU activities, compared to what could be achieved by Member States at national and/or regional levels? What did the European Solidarity Corps programme 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 offer in addition to other education and training support or solidarity schemes available at national level? 	14
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the benefit and added value of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 compared to the benefit of the European Voluntary Service? 	15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What would be the most likely consequences of stopping the European Solidarity Corps programme as a stand-alone programme? 	16
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there national schemes that could effectively replace the European Solidarity Corps if no funding is allocated in the future? 	17

Figure 1: IT Tools for ESC



(source: National Agency JINT vzw)

IX. Appendix

Appendix I: The respondents of the RAY SOC 21-23 datasets

Table: RAY SOC survey 21-23 Flanders – share of respondents per funding NA

NA CODE (attr. 2)	VOL (n=96)	PT (n=59)	SOL (n=8)
BE05	37,50%	33,90%	37,50% (n=3)
BE03	0,00%	3,40%	0,00%
BE04	1,00%	5,10%	0,00%
Other	61,50%	57,60%	62,5% (n=5)

Table: RAY SOC survey 21-23 Flanders – share of respondents per funding NA

Sending Country (attr. 15)	VOL (n=96)	PT (n=59)	SOL (n=8)
Belgium	46,90%	44,10%	37,50% (n=3)
Other	53,10%	55,90%	62,50% (n=5)

Appendix II: suggestions for the improvement of RAY data collection

Based on the experiences during this research project, simplification measures are formulated for the RAY questionnaire and the datasets.

For the respondents to the questionnaires:

E.g. In the survey, do not distinguish between gauging the general objectives of ESC on the one hand and the strategic objectives of ESC on the other. From a participant perspective, such a distinction does not make sense.

E.g. When questioning the environmental sustainability priority. Do not make a difference between sustainable development as a social, political, ecological... question. Similarly, refrain from separately inquiring contributions in everyday life, in society and in politics. From the researchers understanding, these divisions are hard to comprehend and the resulting insights offer minimal added value.

E.g. When questioning the participation priority, do not question if participants are interested in participating in democratic processes as this question lacks clarity regarding its intended meaning

For the analysis of the datasets:

Where possible, the RAY MON datasets of young people participants and youth worker participants should overlap. Thus, datasets will consist of larger numbers.

Do not work with different thematic modules and impact modules. The number of respondents in smaller and middle sized countries is too little to further split them up.

Avoid sliders with 10 categories (e.g. RAY SOC module programme management). In our view, these questions can also be answered using five or fewer categories, making the interpretation more straightforward.