



European  
Commission



**Interim evaluation for the 2021-2027 European  
Solidarity Corps, final evaluation for the 2018-  
2020 European Solidarity Corps and final  
evaluation for the 2014-2020 EU Aid  
Volunteers Initiative**

*Final Report*

## **EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

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# **Interim evaluation for the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps, final evaluation for the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps and final evaluation for the 2014- 2020 EU Aid Volunteers Initiative**

*Final Report*

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## ABSTRACT

In compliance with Articles 21(2) and 21(6) of the European Solidarity Corps Regulation (EU) 2021/888, this study provides the interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme and the final evaluation of the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps programme, assessing the programmes' implementation and performance results (effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance and European added value). In addition, the study provides the final evaluation of the 2014-2020 EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, reviewing, updating and complementing the initial "ex-post" evaluation of 2014-2020. A comprehensive methodology was deployed during the evaluation and included extensive desk research, various stakeholder consultation activities, case studies, a counterfactual analysis, and cost-effectiveness assessments.

The European Solidarity Corps responds effectively to the evolving needs of European society, promoting social cohesion, individual development and inclusion. The programme has a positive impact on individuals, organisations and communities. Participants experience personal and professional growth as well as increased civic engagement. Organisations benefit from improved project management and inclusion practices, while communities experience increased social cohesion and intercultural understanding. The programme aligns with the European Commission's priorities of democratic participation, inclusion, diversity and environmental sustainability. The efficiency of the programme's operations is commendable, although funding constraints due to inflation and support for participants with fewer opportunities highlight the need for better budget alignment. Compared to the 2018-2020 period, the coherence of the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps is strengthened by clear management distinctions and improved synergies following the integration of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative.

Key recommendations suggest improving the identification of people with fewer opportunities to facilitate their further inclusion in the programme, aligning programme objectives and funding, improving IT and monitoring tools, and clarifying the purpose of the humanitarian aid strand.

## RÉSUMÉ

Conformément à l'article 21, paragraphes 2 et 6, du règlement relatif au Corps européen de solidarité (UE) 2021/888, la présente étude couvre l'évaluation intermédiaire du programme Corps européen de solidarité 2021-2027 et l'évaluation finale du programme Corps européen de solidarité 2018-2020, en analysant la mise en œuvre des programmes et leurs résultats sur la base des critères d'efficacité, d'efficience, de cohérence, de pertinence et de valeur ajoutée européenne). En outre, l'étude fournit l'évaluation finale de l'Initiative des Volontaires de l'aide de l'UE 2014-2020, en examinant, mettant à jour et complétant l'évaluation initiale « ex-post » de 2014-2020. Une méthodologie complète a été déployée au cours de l'évaluation, comprenant une recherche documentaire approfondie, diverses activités de consultation des parties prenantes, des études de cas, une analyse contrefactuelle et des évaluations du rapport coût-efficacité.

Le Corps européen de solidarité répond efficacement aux besoins changeants de la société européenne, en promouvant la cohésion sociale, le développement individuel et l'inclusion. Le programme a un impact positif sur les individus, les organisations et les communautés. Les participants font l'expérience d'un développement personnel et professionnel ainsi que d'un engagement civique accru. Les organisations bénéficient d'une meilleure gestion de projet et de meilleures pratiques d'inclusion, tandis que les communautés bénéficient d'une

cohésion sociale et d'une compréhension interculturelle accrues. Le programme s'aligne sur les priorités de la Commission européenne en matière de participation démocratique, d'inclusion, de diversité et de durabilité environnementale. L'efficacité des opérations du programme est louable, bien que les contraintes de financement, dues à l'inflation et au soutien aux participants ayant moins d'opportunités, soulignent la nécessité d'un meilleur alignement budgétaire sur les objectifs du programme. Par rapport à la période 2018-2020, la cohérence du Corps européen de solidarité 2021-2027 est renforcée par des distinctions plus claires en matière de gestion et des synergies améliorées à la suite de l'intégration de l'initiative des volontaires de l'aide de l'UE.

Les principales recommandations de l'évaluation suggèrent d'améliorer l'identification des personnes ayant moins d'opportunités afin de faciliter leur inclusion dans le programme, d'aligner les objectifs et le financement du programme, d'améliorer les outils informatiques et de suivi et de clarifier les objectifs du volet d'aide humanitaire.

## KURZFASSUNG

Im Einklang mit Artikel 21 Absatz 2 und Artikel 21 Absatz 6 der Verordnung (EU) 2021/888 über das Europäische Solidaritätskorps stellt diese Studie die Zwischenbewertung des Programms 2021–2027 des Europäischen Solidaritätskorps und die abschließende Bewertung des Programms 2018–2020 des Europäischen Solidaritätskorps dar, in der die Umsetzung und die Ergebnisse der Programme (Wirksamkeit, Effizienz, Kohärenz, Relevanz und europäischer Mehrwert) bewertet werden. Zusätzlich stellt die Studie die abschließende Bewertung der EU-Freiwilligeninitiative 2014–2020 dar und überprüft, aktualisiert und ergänzt die erste „Ex-post“-Bewertung von 2014–2020. Bei der Bewertung wurde eine umfassende Methodik angewandt, die eine umfangreiche Sekundärforschung, verschiedene Konsultationen von Interessengruppen, Fallstudien, eine kontrafaktische Analyse und Kosten-Nutzen-Analysen umfasste.

Das Europäische Solidaritätskorps ist eine wirkungsvolle Antwort auf die sich ändernden Bedürfnisse der europäischen Gesellschaft und fördert den sozialen Zusammenhalt, die individuelle Entwicklung und die Integration. Das Programm hat positive Auswirkungen auf Einzelpersonen, Organisationen und Gemeinden. Die Teilnehmer erfahren eine persönliche und berufliche Weiterentwicklung sowie ein verstärktes bürgerschaftliches Engagement. Organisationen ziehen Nutzen aus einem verbesserten Projektmanagement und einer verbesserten Eingliederungspraxis, während die Gemeinden mehr sozialen Zusammenhalt und interkulturelles Verständnis erfahren. Das Programm orientiert sich an den Prioritäten der Europäischen Kommission: demokratische Teilhabe, Integration, Diversität und ökologische Nachhaltigkeit. Die Wirksamkeit des Programms ist lobenswert, auch wenn inflationsbedingte Finanzierungsengpässe und die Unterstützung von Teilnehmern mit geringeren Chancen die Notwendigkeit einer besseren Budgetanpassung unterstreichen. Verglichen mit dem Zeitraum 2018–2020 wird die Kohärenz des Europäischen Solidaritätskorps 2021–2027 durch klare Unterscheidungen in der Verwaltung und verbesserte Synergien infolge der Integration der EU-Freiwilligeninitiative gestärkt.

Die wichtigsten Empfehlungen der Bewertung betreffen die bessere Identifizierung von Menschen mit geringeren Möglichkeiten, um ihre weitere Einbeziehung in das Programm zu erleichtern, die Abstimmung von Programmzielen und Finanzierung, die Verbesserung der IT- und Überwachungsinstrumente und die Klärung des Zwecks des Bereichs der humanitären Hilfe.

## INTRODUCTION

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative (from 2014 to 2020) and the European Solidarity Corps programme (from 2018 to date) are the two flagship initiatives of the European Union that have supported European values through volunteering. Over the years, the EU initiatives in the field of volunteering have undergone several important changes and reforms towards an integrated approach to volunteering, resulting in the consolidated European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 programme.

**The purpose of this study** is to provide an external evaluation of the programmes by answering evaluation questions concerning their relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and EU-added value. The final report of the evaluation has been prepared on the basis of the requirements set out in the Terms of Reference, the information collected and analysed during the course of the project and the comments made by the Interservice Steering Group representing the contracting authority (both in writing and during the project meetings). **The results of the evaluation of the European Solidarity Corps** will be used to improve, where possible, the implementation of the current programme, which will run until 2027, and to inform the impact assessment of a possible successor programme. They will also contribute to the knowledge base in this area, which may lead to insights for policy development.

The structure of the report is as follows:

1. **Interim evaluation for the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027**
2. **Final evaluation for the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020**
3. **Final evaluation for the EU Aid Volunteers 2014-2020**

Each of these main sections further breaks down into sub-sections addressing each evaluation criteria and specific areas such as relevance (with subheadings for different stakeholders), coherence (internal and external), effectiveness (outputs, results, impacts, sustainability), efficiency (funding, administrative burden, programme implementation, and management), and EU added value (scope, volume effects, process, innovation, network effects). These sections are designed to provide a comprehensive and systematic evaluation of the programmes covered by the report, addressing all relevant aspects of their implementation.

List of annexes:

- **Annex 1:** Synthesis of European Solidarity Corps national implementation reports
- **Annex 2:** Factual summary report of the public consultation
- **Annex 3:** Stakeholder consultation synopsis report
- **Annex 4:** Interview questionnaires
- **Annex 5:** Survey questionnaires
- **Annex 6:** Survey results and datasets
- **Annex 7:** Counterfactual analysis of the European Solidarity Corps programme

- **Annex 8:** Social media analysis of the European Solidarity Corps programme
- **Annex 9:** Horizontal case studies
- **Annex 10:** Tender specifications

# 1. METHODOLOGY OF THE EVALUATION

This section outlines the methodological approach, principles and data that guided and informed the evaluation.

## 1.1. DESK RESEARCH

Desk research for this evaluation comprised (1) a **review of relevant literature and documents** and (2) an **analysis of administrative and monitoring data** collected for each programme. The evaluation team consulted a wide range of documents and sources, including (a) policy documents, which provided the legal and operational framework of the programmes; (b) studies, evaluations and assessments analysing their implementation; and (c) relevant technical and operational documents which provided both valuable contextual evidence and statistical and monitoring data.

The synthesised results of the desk research were used to inform the findings of this report and the preparation of case studies. In addition, desk research was instrumental in the evaluation team's preparations for applying other research methods, including the conceptual and technical development of the interview and survey programmes and the implementation of other activities, such as the cost-effectiveness assessment.

The key challenge in analysing administrative and monitoring data stemmed from issues with its accuracy and reliability. Three years after the programme's completion, the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative lacked any budgetary data or reports, despite the Commission sharing all available data, none of which included financial statements. Instead, the evaluation had to rely on data reported in previous evaluations or the Commission's 2023 long-term budget (MFF) performance results.

For the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020, there seem to be no major discrepancies between the European Solidarity Corps' monitoring data from 2021 and 2022 and the data reported in MFF performance results reports, and we therefore consider the data from the 2021-2027 programming period to be largely accurate unless otherwise stated. For consistency's sake, the evaluation has opted to utilise indicators from the Commission's programme monitoring dashboards.

## 1.2. STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

The sections below provide an overview of the key consultation methods that informed this study. For more detailed information on the implementation of each method and a summary and comparison of the results, please refer to the stakeholder consultation synopsis report (Annex 3).

### 1.2.1. INTERVIEW PROGRAMME

Interviews were among the main data collection methods in this evaluation, helping to expand our understanding of the programmes and their impact from a wide range of perspectives and gain in-depth insight into stakeholder opinions on all evaluation criteria. As presented in the table below, 121 interviewees were consulted during the evaluation, and their distribution reflects the diverse range of stakeholders of the programmes.

**Table 1. Number of interviewees across different stakeholder groups**

	<b>European Solidarity Corps</b>	<b>EU Aid Volunteers Initiative</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Participating organisations</b>	42	20	62
<b>Participating individuals</b>	6	2	8
<b>European Commission DGs</b>	4	3	7
<b>European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)</b>	2		2
<b>National Agencies</b>	19	n/a*	19
<b>External evaluators</b>	7	n/a**	7
<b>National Authorities</b>	6	n/a*	6
<b>EU bodies</b>	2		2
<b>International organisations and NGOs</b>	2		2
<b>Other stakeholders (such as SALTOs, RAY, etc.)</b>	6	n/a***	6
			<b>121</b>

\* Only applicable for the European Solidarity Corps, as the largest share of the programme is implemented under decentralised management by National Agencies in the participating countries, who were consulted, together with National Authorities, in particular as part of country case studies. \*\* No external evaluators were interviewed for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative due to the fact that, as confirmed by EACEA, the last evaluation took place for the 2019 call. \*\*\* Only applicable for the European Solidarity Corps, to which stakeholders such as SALTO-YOUTH and the RAY network provide support, training and monitoring.

### **1.2.2. SURVEY PROGRAMME**

Online surveys were one of the key data collection methods used to inform the evaluation of the three programmes. The targeted survey programme consisted of five large surveys addressing the following target groups:

- Surveys of the European Solidarity Corps programme:
  - (1) individual participants
  - (2) individual applicants
  - (3) participating organisations
- Surveys of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative:
  - (4) individual participants

- (5) participating organisations

The surveys were launched in January and February 2024 and closed at the end of February 2024. The table below provides an overview of the target populations and the response rates achieved.

**Table 2. Main statistics relating to the implementation of the targeted surveys**

Target group	Survey launch date	Survey closure date	number of invitations sent out	Number of responses received	Response rate*	Number of responses included in the analysis after cleaning
EU Aid Volunteers organisations	25 January 2024	12 February 2024	253	Partial 12 Complete: 61 Total: 73	23,8%	Partial: 5 Complete: 61 Total: 66
EU Aid Volunteers individuals			465	Partial: 21 Complete: 91 Total: 112	19,4%	Partial: 9 Complete: 91 Total: 100
European Solidarity Corps organisations			5 939	Partial: 328 Complete: 978 Total: 1 306	16,4%	Partial: 111 Complete: 977 Total: 1 088
European Solidarity Corps individuals – participants			68 495	Partial: 2 721 Complete: 7 834 Total: 10 555	11,4%	Participants: Partial: 2 160 Complete: 8 513 Total: 10 673
European Solidarity Corps individuals – applicants			13 February 2024	28 February 2024	64 392	Partial: 2 078 Complete: 3 915 Total: 5 993

\*Based on completed responses only. Response rates were calculated using the formula:

$$\text{Response rate} = \frac{\text{No. of invitations received}}{\text{No. of responses sent out}} * 100\%$$

### 1.2.3. PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The public consultation aimed to collect information, expertise and views from programme participants, relevant stakeholders, and the general public to help inform the evaluation of the programmes. The evaluation team developed an integrated questionnaire covering the European Solidarity Corps and the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative. The public consultation was published on the European Commission’s ‘Have your say’ portal on 13 November 2023 and ran until 5 February 2024. In total, **673 responses** were received from individuals and organisations. The factual summary report on the results of the Public Consultation is provided in Annex 2.

### 1.3. CASE STUDIES

To examine key aspects and achievements of the programmes in-depth, the evaluation team implemented 13 case studies. Data for the case studies was collected through desk research, selected survey questions and interviews. Key insights and examples from the case studies have been integrated in boxes under different evaluation criteria within this report.

**Eight country-level case studies** contributed to a comprehensive evaluation of the programmes by examining country-level results in Latvia, Slovenia, the Netherlands, Germany and Türkiye (European Solidarity Corps) and Colombia and Uganda (EU Aid Volunteers Initiative). The selection of countries includes both those where the popularity of the programmes was higher and those where it was lower. In addition, the evaluation team produced a comparative report on the six European Solidarity Corps case studies. The case studies were developed based on two exemplary case studies shared with the client as part of the first interim report.

**Five horizontal case studies** (Annex 9) addressed specific topics requested by the Terms of Reference and areas considered highly relevant to the programmes' evaluation periods. A key added value of the horizontal case studies is that they brought together key findings on certain important areas of programme performance across different evaluation criteria and also enabled the evaluation team to address issues that were not, or only to a limited extent, covered by the evaluation questions. The horizontal case studies addressed the following themes:

**Table 3. Horizontal case studies**

Programme	Case study	Theme
<b>European Solidarity Corps</b>	The contribution of the European Solidarity Corps to enhanced social inclusion and diversity	Examining the extent to which the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme has so far been successful in reaching the goal (set in the European Solidarity Corps Regulation (EU) 2021/888) of putting in place special measures to promote social inclusion and the participation of disadvantaged young people.
	Sustainable development in the European Solidarity Corps programme	Evaluating the extent to which the programme was in line with sustainable development principles and respected the 'do no harm' principle foreseen in the European Solidarity Corps Regulation (EU) 2021/888.
	The added value of international / cross-border dimension of the European Solidarity Corps programme	Evaluating the results of the European Solidarity Corps programme in fostering (1) cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, (2) a sense of European identity among young people, and (3) the development of partnerships between organisations from different participating countries
	The flexibility and adaptability of the European Solidarity Corps programme	Evaluating the degree of flexibility in the European Solidarity Corps programme allowing to adapt to major external challenges such as COVID-19 or Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as the impact of inflation.
<b>EU Aid Volunteers Initiative</b>	Gender mainstreaming in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative	Evaluating how successful the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative has been in contributing to strengthening the gender perspective in the EU's humanitarian aid policy.

## 1.4. COUNTERFACTUAL ANALYSIS

The evaluation included the implementation of a counterfactual analysis for the European Solidarity Corps **to measure the real causal effect of the programme**<sup>1</sup>. The aim was to determine the programme's effectiveness and impact on individual participants. The analysis used administrative and survey data to compare the characteristics of individual European Solidarity Corps participants (who represent the treatment group) with those of non-participants (meaning rejected applicants to the programme, who represent the control group).

The study team used the *genetic matching* algorithm to create a highly comparable sample of applicants and participants, similar to the ones achieved in randomised experiments. The matching method is based on a set of covariates that influence an individual's likelihood of participating in the treatment (programme). Using this method, the study team selected

<sup>1</sup> Due to limitations observed during the inception phase, it was agreed with the client to not to provide a counterfactual for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative and to only focus the analysis on individuals for the European Solidarity Corps programme.

a control group whose distribution of covariates mirrors that of the treatment group. The study team focused on several prominent themes in the analysis of the programme's effects on participants: (1) participation in volunteering and solidarity activities outside the European Solidarity Corps (2) socio-political values (3) professional and educational influence and (4) language learning.

The counterfactual analysis is provided in Annex 7.

## 1.5. COST-EFFECTIVENESS ASSESSMENT

The evaluation included a cost-effectiveness assessment for the evaluation of the European Solidarity Corps programme for the periods 2018-2020 and 2021-2023 and the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative 2014-2020. The analysis estimated the costs of the programmes in euro values and in current prices, whilst the benefits were qualified and – where possible – quantified. The assessment findings are integrated within the report under the efficiency criteria for each programme (sections 2.4, 3.4 and 5.4). However, as noted in section 1.1, certain parts of the analysis were inconclusive, such as the comparisons between the programming periods of the European Solidarity Corps or the direct and indirect management actions, due to the gaps and limitations observed in the available data.

## 1.6. SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

The evaluation used social media analysis to assess the visibility of the programmes and the sentiment of the messages they promoted. The analysis contributed to answering the evaluation questions on the extent to which the results of the programmes were disseminated and how successful the programme was in attracting and reaching target audiences and groups within the different areas of the programmes' scope.

The analysis used the Bandwatch social media analytic tool to track social media pages daily. The tool collected approximately 79 000 unique mentions of the European Solidarity Corps and other relevant search keywords from various sources, including social media pages, such as X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and EU websites, such as europa.eu, yeseuropa.org, salto-youth.net, as well as other relevant websites, such as reliefweb.int; forums, such as reddit.com, news sites; video platforms, such as youtube.com, along other sources. The timeline used for the analysis encompasses data mentions collected from the 1st of January 2018 to the 22nd of April 2024.

The collected social media mentions were further examined through discourse analysis. The main themes that emerged through the analysis are the promotion and visibility of the European Solidarity Corps; engagement with unforeseen events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK's withdrawal from the EU (Brexit); as well as discourses of funding and financial support and engagement and community building.

The key findings of the analysis are presented in boxes within sections 2.3.3 and 2.4.4 while the complete analysis, its limitations and suggestions for improvements are presented in Annex 8.

## 1.7. LIMITATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

All three evaluations were carried out in accordance with the **European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines**. They provide reliable evaluation evidence covering the evaluation criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU-added value of the programmes' implementation. Overall, the evaluation of the programmes **provides**

**robust findings based on the triangulation of high-quality data collected through a variety of methods:** desk research, cost-effectiveness assessment, counterfactual analysis, stakeholder consultation activities (the public consultation, the survey programme and interviews), social media analysis and case study analysis.

As indicated in the Terms of Reference, **indicators and assessment parameters, as well as information sources and methods, were assigned to each evaluation question.** This operationalisation of the evaluation questions was used by the study in the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for data triangulation and providing an appropriate mix of evidence for the evaluation questions at hand. In addition, the evaluation received ongoing support from the European Commission, and in particular, DG EAC, which facilitated access to data on programme performance and management, as well as access to the contact details needed to conduct stakeholder consultations. In addition, the client and the Interservice Steering Group reviewed the final evaluation report several times and provided detailed feedback and comments.

Most of the **key limitations and constraints** were identified by the end of the inception phase. These are described below, together with the **mitigation measures** taken by the team to ensure the robustness of the evidence base.

The response rates and number of responses to the targeted surveys varied between the two programmes and different stakeholder groups. The study team made significant communication efforts, including a user-friendly, thoroughly tested survey design, an extended survey deadline, and additional reminders, which led to active participation from many groups. Although the response rate among individual applicants and participants in the European Solidarity Corps was slightly lower than that of organisations, their contributions were sufficient to achieve data saturation. In addition, although a satisfactory response rate was achieved, the number of individual participants and organisations from the former EU Aid Volunteers initiative is relatively low due to the small size of the programme and the limited scope of the evaluation (focusing on the final years of the Initiative). However, **the number of responses collected for all target groups and programmes was sufficient in absolute terms to carry out statistical analyses,** in particular for the counterfactual analysis of European Solidarity Corps participants.

By their very nature (particularly in relation to the coherence criteria), **some of the answers to the evaluation questions relied heavily on desk research and interview data.** To mitigate this issue, the study team carried out an extensive programme of interviews with representatives of management and implementation bodies, national authorities, participating individuals and organisations, external experts and other stakeholders. The evaluation also took into account secondary sources of information, in particular, reports from networks and research bodies on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps. In addition, the findings presented under each evaluation criterion clearly indicate the extent to which they are based on opinions, facts or other types of evidence.

In addition, **the administrative and monitoring data** collected by the programmes served as an important source for a sound analysis of the performance and cost-effectiveness of the programmes. However, the evaluation faced challenges due to gaps and limitations in the available data. These include incomplete data on the implementation of the 2021-2023 European Solidarity Corps programme at the time of writing, as well as gaps and limitations in the 2018-2020 budget data. While the evaluation used other data collection and analysis methods to validate and contextualise the findings, analyses of some aspects of the programme's cost-effectiveness (mainly comparisons between programming periods or direct and indirect management actions) remained inconclusive.

These **limitations are clearly identified and contextualised** in the relevant sections on programme efficiency.

Finally, there are some limitations to specific analyses. These include specific aspects of the counterfactual analysis (which is dependent on the treatment and conditions applied) and the social media analysis (due to the limitations of the web crawler/scraping), the **limitations of which are clearly identified in the respective annexes** (Annexes 7 and 8).

Taken together, the triangulation of data from a **highly diverse set of methods** applied by the evaluation and the **high number and diversity of responses** to the consultation activities (public consultation, interviews and targeted surveys) provide **reliable evaluation evidence and robust results**

## 2. INTERIM EVALUATION FOR THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS 2021-2027

### 2.1. RELEVANCE

#### Box 1. Summary conclusions

- The objectives and priorities of the European Solidarity Corps are especially relevant for **promoting social cohesion and individual development** among young people.
- The programme is highly relevant in **addressing local societal needs** due to its diverse formats and topics, enabling tailored projects.
- The programme has also proved **adaptable in responding to the impact of climate-related hazards** (e.g. floods) and other disasters such as earthquakes.
- The programme's relevance is underscored by **high satisfaction rates among individual participants**, particularly in how the programme addresses significant challenges they face.
- The European Solidarity Corps **addresses crucial needs of European society**, especially in fostering participation in democratic life, inclusion, and diversity.
- There is scope to **further improve the programme's ability to meet the needs of participants from diverse backgrounds** by improving the identification and, in turn, targeted support to young people with fewer opportunities.

#### 2.1.1. NATIONAL GOVERNMENTAL STAKEHOLDERS

**The European Solidarity Corps is highly relevant to the priorities of participating countries, particularly in promoting social cohesion and the individual development of young people.** Additionally, in EU neighbourhood countries, the European Solidarity Corps' relevance extends to enhancing social exchange and strengthening European cohesion.

**The European Solidarity Corps is highly relevant in addressing local societal needs due to its diverse range of formats and topics enabling tailored projects.**

The interview programme with national stakeholders has shown that the European Solidarity Corps provides diverse formats and topics for participation. This variety allows for a wide array of projects, which can be customised to address societal needs at the local level and are therefore highly relevant.

### ***Horizontal priorities***

European Solidarity Corps' horizontal priorities for the 2021-2027 programming period are inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, environment and fight against climate change and participation in democratic life.

**The programme allows for flexibility in adding annual thematic priorities beyond the four horizontal priorities.** Annual thematic priorities can address pressing challenges and difficulties and are mainly executed by centralised actions. For instance, the thematic annual priority of 'Promoting Healthy Lifestyles' has been changed based on changing priorities in the area of health. It was first added in 2021, and it initially focused on the COVID-19 emergency health response, then shifted to promoting overall well-being and healthy lifestyles. By 2023, it had a stronger emphasis on marginalised groups, including gender-specific needs and mental health. Similarly, the 'Inclusion and Diversity' priority evolved to focus more on local community needs in 2023, such as refugee relief, assistance, support, and integration<sup>2</sup>.

**National actors mostly felt that horizontal and annual priorities of the programme were relevant to country realities, flexible enough, and mostly aligned with societal needs.** Minor criticism about the mental health (health promotion and support) or digital transformation priorities stemmed from some national actors' belief that organisations may not be adequately equipped to address these priorities (detailed later in sections 2.1.3 and 2.1.4).

**National representatives felt that the flexibility of the European Solidarity Corps ensured its relevance to emerging societal needs, including the impact of disasters such as earthquakes and climate-related hazards (e.g. floods).** For example, the 'environmental sustainability and climate goals' priority was broadened in 2022 to include disaster response. In addition, several changes were made to the objectives of the 'Volunteering Teams in High-Priority Areas' action during the programming period to include a broader focus on man-made and natural disasters. **The adaptability and responsiveness of the programme to emerging societal needs and crises were also recognised by its participating countries<sup>3</sup>.** National implementation reports specifically cited the programme's support during the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and in response to the effects of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

### **2.1.2. EU AND INTERNATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS**

Interviews with representatives of EU youth organisations confirm that **the European Solidarity Corps programme addresses the needs of European society, particularly in the areas of 'Participation in democratic life' and 'Inclusion and diversity'**.

Members of EU youth organisations emphasised that **the design and implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme is well suited to promote inclusion and participation in democratic life at the European level**, mainly because the volunteering experience promotes young people's engagement and connection with other

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<sup>2</sup> Annual Work Programme 2023

<sup>3</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

(or their own) European communities. This is further illustrated by the survey results, which show that participants can become more socially aware. Although they may not have initially applied with the specific aim of promoting solidarity and civic engagement (although this was the case for 41%, 4 202, N=10 342)<sup>4</sup>, their experiences contributed to the development of a sense of solidarity and empathy for others, as well as social and political awareness.

Interviewees also noted that the **increased focus on humanitarian aid, solidarity, and refugee assistance – and thus, the increase in projects in these thematic areas – contributes to value-based learning for young people and strengthens the European Solidarity Corps’ role in promoting solidarity, cohesion, and social inclusion**. For example, they highlighted an increase in large-scale projects related to integrating refugees<sup>5</sup> and underlined the role of volunteering team projects in proactively addressing important crises, such as the emerging needs arising from Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine or crises linked to disasters such as floods and earthquakes<sup>6</sup>. Interviewees also saw environment and climate change as increasingly important. The programme contributed 18.0% of its budget to this horizontal objective in 2021, 15.8% in 2022 and 16.5% in 2023<sup>7</sup>.

Lastly, interviewed EU and international stakeholders also believed that the **networking opportunities arising from the implementation and design of the European Solidarity Corps are suitable to support organisational capacity building, knowledge sharing and community building** among volunteers, as well as between host communities and volunteers. In their view, this can contribute to a strengthened European civic sphere. Stakeholders emphasised that this aspect of the programme can be particularly relevant in countries where democracy is under threat<sup>8</sup>.

**Stakeholders agreed that flexibility in programme priorities was necessary to respond effectively to societal challenges**. For instance, during Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the European Solidarity Corps demonstrated flexibility in responding to challenges by adapting project applications to address urgent issues. Similar to the National Agencies, youth organisations also noted the need for ‘continuous learning and improvement’ in the programme in order to respond to crises rapidly, and some stakeholders noted that perhaps even more flexibility could be introduced in terms of the programme’s formats and budget<sup>9</sup>.

### 2.1.3. PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

Participating organisations were generally positive about the alignment between EU societal needs and the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 programme. Interviews with them confirm that the projects meet the needs of both young people and the communities concerned.

**Based on the analysis, most organisations believe that the European Solidarity Corps serves the dual purpose of promoting young people’s (skills and personal) development and contributing to important societal challenges**. Organisations largely agree that their projects directly address the important needs of the communities

<sup>4</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 29 ‘What were the three most important reasons why you applied to become a volunteer with the European Solidarity Corps? Check your top three reasons.’

<sup>5</sup> Interview programme

<sup>6</sup> Interview programme

<sup>7</sup> Source: EU (2023), ‘MFF Performance Results Reports’, retrieved from: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance\\_en#contribution-to-horizontal-priorities](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en#contribution-to-horizontal-priorities).

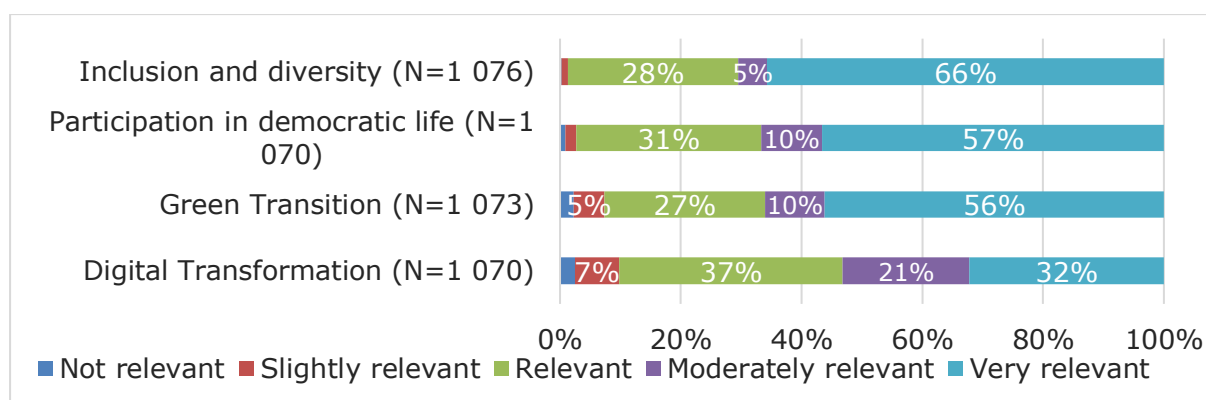
<sup>8</sup> Interview programme

<sup>9</sup> Interview with EU youth organisation

involved - 85% (752, N=887)<sup>10</sup> of organisations. Survey data also shows that **most of the organisations involved in the programme are both youth and volunteering organisations (41%, 477, N=1 077)<sup>11</sup>, many are youth organisations (25%, 295), while solely volunteer organisations are less involved (10%, 111)**. Among surveyed programme participants, 93% (7 696, N=8 309) agreed or strongly agreed that the programme positively impacts young people’s development, while 80% (6 650, N=8 311) believed that it addresses community or societal challenges<sup>12</sup>. These findings are supported by the interview programme, where both aspects of the European Solidarity Corps were found to be relevant.

The interview programme revealed that challenges such as mental health and social isolation of young people were also being addressed, and the programme addressed issues in their local communities in terms of community building and promoting understanding and acceptance.

**Figure 1. Organisations’ perception of the European Solidarity Corps’ horizontal priorities**



Source: survey of organisations. Question 13 ‘The 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme includes four horizontal priorities. In your opinion, to what extent are these priorities relevant to current societal challenges and needs?’

**Organisations agreed that the four horizontal priorities of the European Solidarity Corps were all relevant to current societal needs, particularly inclusion and diversity and participation in democratic life** (see figure above). Interviews further confirmed the relevance of the latter two areas, with organisations stating that the programme promotes solidarity, especially among marginalised and minority groups. The survey also showed that digital transformation was seen as slightly less relevant, with 10% (105) of organisations viewing it as not or only slightly relevant. In interviews and in response to open questions in the survey, organisations described the digital transition as less directly related to their own work than other priorities, which often involved vulnerable communities and addressed more pressing basic needs. This view is also consistent with the broader perception of the programme as focusing on solidarity and inclusion of vulnerable groups. Other organisations noted that while they saw the benefits of digitalisation, they saw it as a more long-term and ‘add-on’ process to other priorities rather than a goal in itself. Nevertheless, many organisations emphasised that they were trying to incorporate this aspect, even if it was not yet a well-established focus. According

<sup>10</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 31 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on engaged communities and societal groups?’

<sup>11</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 3 ‘Based on its primary activities, mission, and focus, would you consider your organisation...?’

<sup>12</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 103 ‘How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements: The European Solidarity Corps programme...’

to European Solidarity Corps monitoring data, an average of 26.0% of contracted projects between 2021 and 2023 addressed the European Commission's Digital Priority<sup>13</sup>.

As more and more young people are struggling with **mental health**, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its inclusion in the programme's priorities was also considered timely and relevant by organisations. As shown by the survey, a growing number of programme applicants and participants in recent years have experienced such struggles (see section 2.1.4 below).

In the context of the **green priority**, the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 has set environmental sustainability and the fight against climate change as one of the horizontal priorities of the programme. As outlined in the box below, **the evaluation finds that the programme has demonstrated a strong commitment to sustainability**. For the complete horizontal case study on this subject, please refer to Annex 9.

## Box 2. Sustainable development in the European Solidarity Corps Programme

**In line with its legal basis (Regulation (EU) 2021/888), the European Solidarity Corps programme has demonstrated a strong commitment to sustainability**, addressing global climate mandates such as the Paris Agreement, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the European Green Deal. It effectively mainstreams sustainability by supporting environmentally focused projects, integrating climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, and promoting sustainability awareness among participants.

**To support sustainable development practices, the programme has integrated climate change mitigation and adaptation measures** at the level of National Agencies (increased expertise and support), organisations (inclusion of sustainable practices in award criteria) and individual participants (promotion of the use of low carbon transport for mobility). **The programme promotes green practices, environmental sustainability and climate issues by providing beneficiaries with a versatile framework to integrate sustainability into their activities at different levels of commitment and complexity**. This increases awareness and commitment among organisations and volunteers and positively impacts local communities by involving them in activities and linking local actions to broader EU initiatives.

**The programme successfully raises volunteers' awareness of environmental sustainability and climate change issues**, with 70% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. At the same time, both volunteers and organisations reported a **strong commitment to implementing and promoting sustainable practices at the project level**. To further increase the impact and commitment of organisations, the programme could benefit from more tailored support and resources for organisations to maximise their potential to contribute to sustainability goals in ways that are both effective and feasible.

**The programme was generally flexible and adaptable to specific needs and exceptional situations**, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations recognised the flexible and timely support they had received during the pandemic, as survey results show that organisations agreed that their needs were met during this period (78%, 245, N=314)<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

<sup>14</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 39 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps during the Covid-19 pandemic?'

However, it was also a recurring theme during the interview programme that organisations may not be as flexible as the priorities of the European Solidarity Corps would require. The Inclusion and Diversity Strategy was introduced in 2021 to the programme to support inclusion and target youth with fewer opportunities. However, international training and support organisations noted that it is somewhat more challenging for them to 'retrain' organisations that are not focusing on marginalised or vulnerable populations to change their practices. Additionally, interviews revealed that although organisations are becoming increasingly aware of mental health difficulties among young people, not all of them are sufficiently supported or ready to address mental health issues if they have not been active in this area before.

#### 2.1.4. INDIVIDUALS

**The European Solidarity Corps programme's relevance is reflected in individual participants' high satisfaction rates with their activities, especially with the volunteering projects.** Overall, 90% (7 659, N=8 551)<sup>15</sup> of participants were very satisfied or satisfied with their involvement in the European Solidarity Corps activities. Among volunteering projects, 81% (6 795, N=8 405)<sup>16</sup> felt that their work benefited the community and social groups. As for solidarity projects, 78% (1 250, N=1 599)<sup>17</sup> thought that they also met the needs of young people.

Survey results show that close to half of all participants and applicants faced difficulties related to finding employment at the time of their application to the programme (51% of applicants and 40% of participants), while more than 20% faced economic challenges (i.e. could only afford basic necessities), or had mental health issues (see figure below).

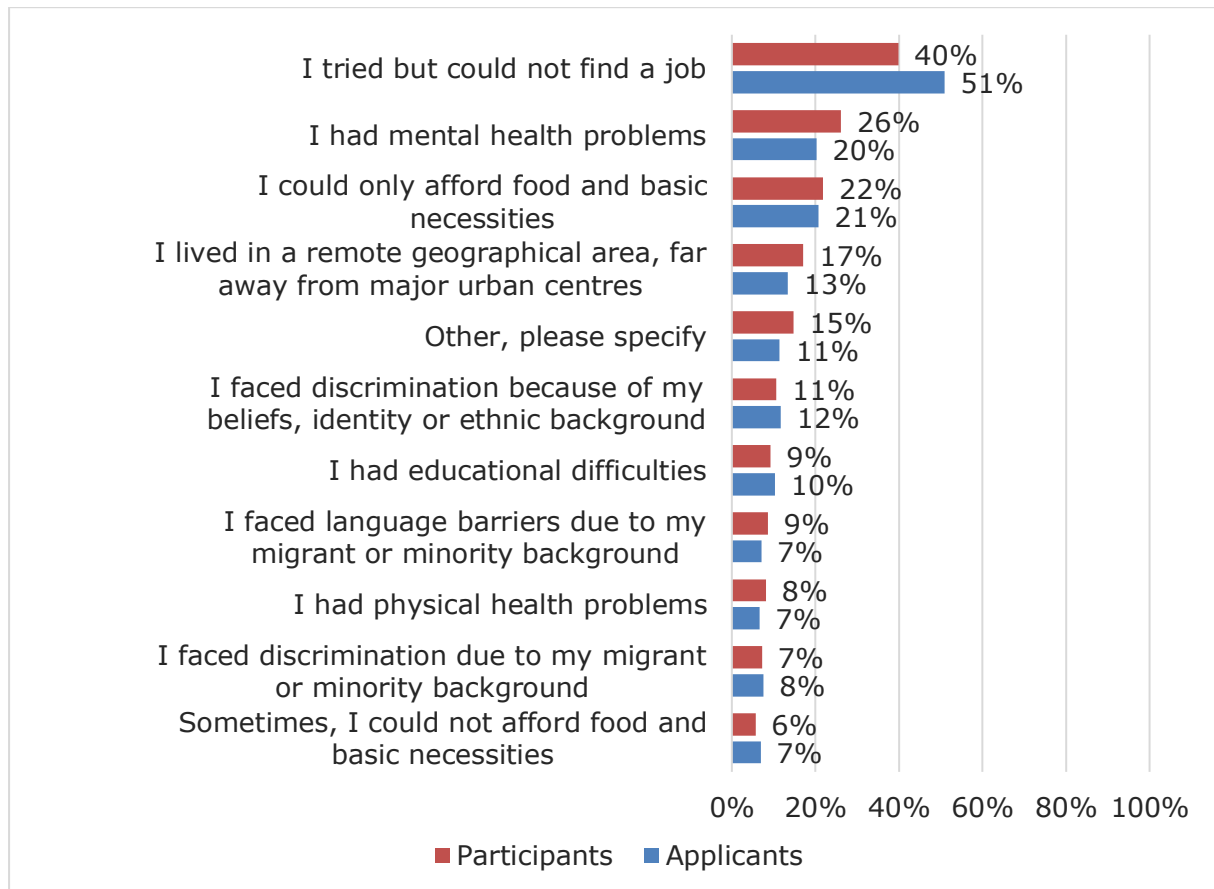
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<sup>15</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 68 'How satisfied are you overall with your European Solidarity Corps experience?'

<sup>16</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 78 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'

<sup>17</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 84 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your solidarity project(s)?'

**Figure 2. Issues faced by European Solidarity Corps participants and applicants**



Source: survey of individuals (participants and applicants). Question 14 'There are different obstacles and opportunities people face in life. In your view, at the time you applied to the European Solidarity Corps, did you face any of these challenges? Check all that apply' (participants: N=7 937; applicants: N=2 625)

**The relevance of the programme to youth seeking opportunities to enhance their employability** is further underscored by the fact that 41%(4 288, N=10 342) of European Solidarity Corps participants cited the desire to gain professional experience or explore potential career paths as their top motivation to participate<sup>18</sup>. In terms of professional experience, the results also show that the majority of participants, 63% (6 610, N=10 460), had either no professional experience or less than one full year of professional experience<sup>19</sup>. Although the evaluation did not assess participants' long-term employment outcomes, the above findings, together with the reported positive impact on participants' personal, professional and educational skills (see section 2.3.2), suggest that participants perceive the programme as an opportunity to improve employment-related competences and thus as a potential bridge between education and the labour market (see also section 2.5.1).

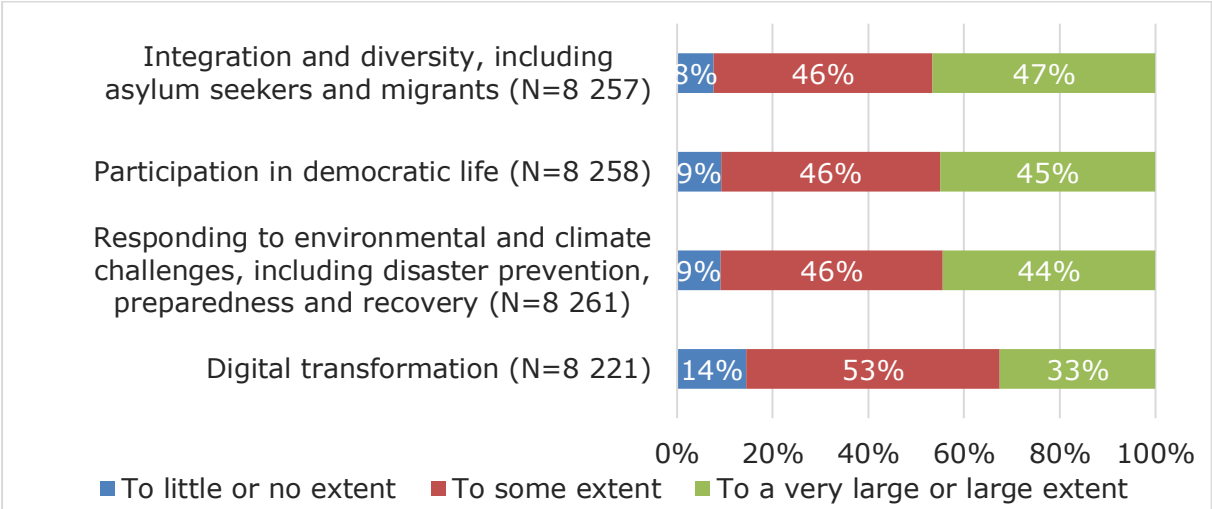
**Most participants also felt that the horizontal programme priorities meet the needs of society, especially priorities of social inclusion and democratic participation** (see figure below). Participants perceived the digital transformation as somewhat less relevant than other priorities. Similar to the responses from organisations, this may reflect the view that digitalisation is seen as less directly linked to the pressing

<sup>18</sup> Source: survey of individual participants. Question 29 'What were the three most important reasons why you applied to become a volunteer with the European Solidarity Corps? Check your top three reasons.'

<sup>19</sup> Source: survey of individual participants. Question 17 'How many years of professional experience did you have at the time you applied to the European Solidarity Corps?'

basic needs of vulnerable communities, which is in line with the programme’s strong focus on solidarity and inclusion.

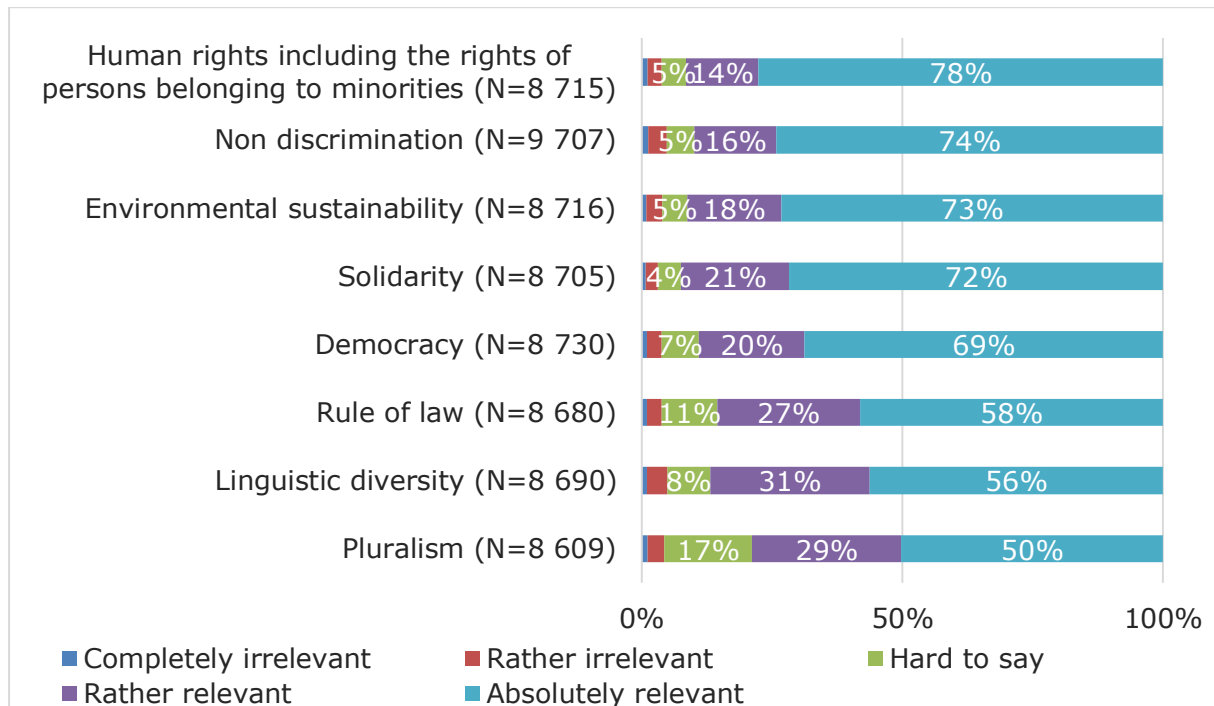
**Figure 3. Relevance of European Solidarity Corps horizontal priorities according to participants**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 102 ‘The European Solidarity Corps has several priorities. In your view, to what extent do they meet the needs and expectations of society?’

When participants were asked whether the EU common values are still relevant, most agreed, especially concerning some of the programme’s core values and priority areas: solidarity, non-discrimination, and democracy (see below). Compared to other areas, it was hard for participants to decide whether pluralism was as relevant as other values.

**Figure 4. European Solidarity Corps participants' views on the EU common values**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 47 'The countries in the European Union have agreed on common values. Some people say they are not relevant anymore, while others find them more important than ever. What do you think?'

### ***Inclusion of people with fewer opportunities***

**The European Solidarity Corps programme is explicitly designed to promote social inclusion and diversity**, as indicated by its general objective in the regulation, foreseeing to 'enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities, primarily volunteering, as a means to strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond, addressing societal and humanitarian challenges on the ground, with a particular focus on the promotion of sustainable development, social inclusion and equal opportunities'.

The regulation foresees that young people with fewer opportunities means young people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, due to their migrant background, or for reasons such as a disability or educational difficulties or for any other reason, including a reason that could give rise to discrimination under Article 21 of the Charter, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the programme.

The European Solidarity Corps **Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (2021)** enhanced participation of young people with fewer opportunities through additional support, services, and funding, with notable increases in participation rates (self-reported, see section on effectiveness) during 2021-2023. The strategy promoted their inclusion through additional support and services (including increased mentoring, personal assistance and sign language interpreters), funding and improved accessibility throughout the programme. The strategy also aimed to involve more organisations working with this social group.

Additionally, some other updates to the programme have resulted in the programme being better catering and meeting the needs of people with fewer opportunities (PWFOs), in particular:

- The opportunity to apply for shorter-term projects
- The opportunity to apply for projects in the applicant's own country
- The opportunity to participate in team volunteering

Case studies show that the percentage of such participants in selected countries increased in the 2021-2023 programming period compared to the previous period.

### ***Meeting the unique needs of people with fewer opportunities through early identification***

**The current method of identifying and supporting people with fewer opportunities within the European Solidarity Corps programme faces significant challenges.** These challenges arise from the broad criteria defining PWFOs and the reliance on self-reporting, which complicates accurate identification during the application phase. Organisations frequently struggle to identify PWFOs during the selection process due to insufficient information at the application stage<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, they often recognise the specific needs of PWFOs only after arrival once their background and specific challenges become evident, which hampers timely support and integration. This delay prevents organisations from making the necessary arrangements to fully include and integrate these individuals from the start. During the interview programme, organisations raised the issue that their approach to people with fewer opportunities is complicated by the fact that they may not be aware of whether participants belong to this group until they arrive<sup>21</sup>.

**'It's difficult to identify individuals with fewer opportunities, there's a lack of guidance on how to effectively approach this task. Such individuals are often only detected once they arrive, once their context becomes clear.'**- Interview programme with participating organisations, Spain

During the interview programme, it was also expressed that the **inclusion of people with fewer opportunities can be even more difficult for those organisations that did not focus on this group previously**, as they may not be equipped to accommodate their needs. Implementing more robust identification processes at the application stage is crucial. This could involve questionnaires to capture potential challenges or interviews to gather comprehensive information about applicants' circumstances<sup>22</sup>.

**Challenges in targeting, identifying or monitoring PWFOs were also highlighted in the national implementation reports<sup>23</sup>.** In addition, while all countries recognised the strong focus of the programme on the inclusion of this target group, many also identified other barriers that limit the full participation of PWFOs in the programme, such as limited awareness of the programme and low outreach, complex application procedures, a lack of knowledge, resources or confidence in participating organisations, and insufficient financial support.

In addition to the challenges identified above, **there are specific considerations for the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities in the humanitarian aid strand** for which volunteering activities take place mainly in third countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Logistical and financial barriers can be high, as noted by organisations, who emphasise that the large scale of the mobility and associated costs may discourage young people from taking part, especially those economically disadvantaged<sup>24</sup>. Therefore,

<sup>20</sup> Based on the Interview programme and Case Studies

<sup>21</sup> Interview programme

<sup>22</sup> A more specific model is proposed within the Horizontal Study on Inclusion of PWFOs.

<sup>23</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

<sup>24</sup> Interview programme and answers to open-ended survey questions

providing a high level of support to candidates and sufficient funds for participation is particularly important<sup>25</sup>. In this context, several surveyed organisations noted that the programme could also do more to support applicants from non-EU countries such as Türkiye, who also require visas to take part in the strand's mandatory face-to-face training taking place in EU Member States and who are more likely to face economic barriers. Some Turkish organisations interviewed suggested that the programme could consider organising training activities in Türkiye or online to facilitate the participation of Turkish youth in the strand.

### **Unique motivational factors of PWFOs**

**The evaluation results show that, among survey respondents, PWFOs have somewhat different motivations for participating in the European Solidarity Corps than the general participant group.** Notably, 48% (782) of PWFOs cited developing soft skills – such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability – as a motivation, compared to 42% (3 693) of other participants<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, only 32% (523) of PWFOs indicated the desire to volunteer abroad as a motivation, slightly lower than the 39% (3 426) observed among the general participant group. These findings align with interview findings, highlighting that PWFOs often prioritise in-country opportunities due to lower perceived barriers to participation.

While specific life outcomes for PWFOs are challenging to quantify, stakeholders generally agree that the programme positively impacts youth, particularly those with fewer opportunities. These outcomes, driven by the unique motivations of PWFOs, suggest that the programme is especially transformative for this group:

**'The programme has yielded positive results for [individual participants], particularly those with fewer opportunities, often leading to job placements or helping them get out of long-term need situations.'** - National Agency

## **2.2. COHERENCE**

refinement to better assess the impact and reach of the programme.

### **Box 3. Summary conclusions**

- **No specific incoherencies are perceived** among directly and indirectly managed action types, as stakeholders consider both important and distinct in terms of their objectives.
- The **streamlining of volunteering activities** under the European Solidarity Corps has improved the programme's coherence.
- While **integrating the programme into Erasmus+** may seem cost-effective to some, many stakeholders worry that it could raise participation barriers and weaken the programme's foundational values, targeted reach, and impact.
- There is a **high degree of complementarity between the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps and other EU policy initiatives in the field of**

<sup>25</sup> For reference, among surveyed EU Aid Volunteers, only 56% (N=91) felt that their financial costs for participation in the Initiative had been sufficiently covered.

<sup>26</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 29 'What were the three most important reasons why you applied to become a volunteer with the European Solidarity Corps? Check your top three reasons.'

**youth**, as well as the European Commission's broader strategic priorities for 2019-2024.

- The European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 is **overall complementary to a number of other relevant EU programmes**. However, these complementarities are strongest with the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes, and there is room to develop synergies with them further.

### 2.2.1. INTERNAL COHERENCE

#### *Coherence between directly and indirectly managed actions*

**No specific incoherencies are perceived among directly and indirectly managed action types, as stakeholders consider both important and distinct in terms of their objectives.** The rationale for delegating directly and indirectly managed actions is clear, with appropriate delimitation of responsibilities and tasks between the National Agencies and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency. While some of the participating organisations interviewed provided limited comments due to their lack of familiarity with both types of actions, those who could comment saw them as adding value by targeting different types of participants and thematic areas and their overall shorter duration. Compared to the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps, the current programme has improved its internal coherence by streamlining procedures, in particular the application process for quality labels<sup>27</sup>.

In terms of coordination, several interviewed National Agencies perceived a gap in the flow of information between them and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency with obstacles such as different systems and tools used and a lack of shared information channels. They expressed a need for better information sharing, which could help them better support organisations that approach them with questions about different actions and monitor which organisations are involved in which activities. Signing a common memorandum of understanding in 2023 indicates steps taken to improve coordination and cooperation.

#### *Alignment of the humanitarian aid strand as part of a youth programme*

Integrating the humanitarian aid strand into the European Solidarity Corps has streamlined volunteering activities by consolidating them into a single programme. At the same time, **the transition from the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative to the European Solidarity Corps marked a shift in focus towards a more individualised and learning-centred approach.** In line with the priorities of the European Solidarity Corps as a youth-focused initiative, the new strand focuses on providing opportunities for young volunteers to gain valuable learning experiences while showing solidarity with people in need in third countries through participation in humanitarian action.

**Consultations with stakeholders suggest that changes in the purpose and implementation of the strand compared to the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative were not fully understood by some participating organisations.** In surveys and interviews, some organisations that had also participated in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative expressed concern that the age limit for the strand was too low, stressing that this could limit their ability to recruit more highly skilled and professional volunteers. This indicates a need for

<sup>27</sup> Examples of improvements introduced for the 2021-2027 period include the clarification of the Quality Label system and the addition of the Lead Quality Label, which has simplified the funding application process for accredited organisations, as well as clearer procedures regarding which body (i.e. National Agencies, EACEA and SALTOs) the Quality Label application should be submitted to based on the organisation's country of origin.

further clarification and communication of the purpose and design of the strand to all stakeholders in order to manage participants' expectations better. A clear focus on the primary objective of the strand on facilitating individual learning and development while emphasising community impact would also help to better align the efforts of the strand with the overarching objectives of the European Solidarity Corps as an inclusive youth programme promoting equal opportunities.

At the same time, **the strand's higher age limit of 35 years, compared to 30 years for all other volunteering and solidarity activities under the European Solidarity Corps, poses a challenge to the internal coherence of the programme and contributes to perceived ambiguities among stakeholders about the purpose of the strand.** Currently, the average age of registrants in the strand is 22.4 years, with 17% of registrants between the ages of 26 and 30 and only 3% between the ages of 31 and 35<sup>28</sup>, indicating a clear decline in demand from those above the age of 30. Aligning the age limit of the strand with the rest of the programme would improve its consistency and internal coherence. It would also reflect the average age of applicants and help to manage the expectations of participating organisations.

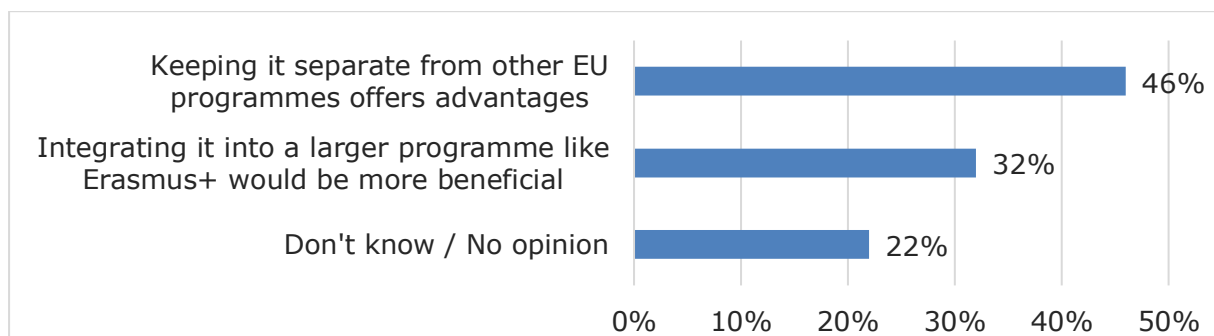
### ***The possible integration of the European Solidarity Corps with Erasmus+***

In the discussion on the integration of the European Solidarity Corps with Erasmus+, stakeholders have not shown a clear preference. **While integration into Erasmus+ may seem cost-effective to some, many worry that it could raise participation barriers and weaken the programme's foundational values, targeted reach, and impact.**

**The programme's participating countries also share this mixed view<sup>29</sup>.** While some emphasised that the programme should remain separate to maintain the European Solidarity Corps' focus, others perceived it as an opportunity to improve its visibility and efficiency. Several countries did not voice a clear preference. Instead, they emphasised that regardless of the future format of the programme, it was crucial to maintain its unique identity and to increase funding.

Survey results from the public consultation reveal a divided stance, with 46% (175) of respondents seeing benefits in maintaining the European Solidarity Corps as a standalone programme and 32% (123) believing that integration into a larger programme like Erasmus+ could be more advantageous. 22% (83) of the respondents indicated that they don't know or have no opinion on this aspect (see figure below).

**Figure 5. Stakeholder perception of a possible integration of the Corps with Erasmus+ (N=381)**



Source: public consultation. Question 25 'Thinking about the European Solidarity Corps and its role, do you see

<sup>28</sup> DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

<sup>29</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

advantages in keeping it separate from other EU programmes, or do you think it would be more beneficial to integrate it into a larger programme like Erasmus+?’

In exploring the reasons for these positions, in response to an open-ended follow-up public consultation question and during interviews, some respondents argued that **keeping the European Solidarity Corps separate could maintain the unique character of the programme and could allow for focused objectives related to youth engagement, social inclusion and solidarity, with dedicated funding, easier monitoring and management, and clarity in its implementation.** Respondents cited the following risks and concerns about potential integration:

- **Risk of reduced specialised support and flexibility to accommodate needs:** The European Solidarity Corps currently benefits from targeted support and funding for solidarity and volunteering projects, including flexibility to accommodate inclusion principles in practice, such as covering inclusion costs. Integration could lead to less focused attention and resources on these aspects, which could affect the quality and effectiveness of the programme and reduce its effectiveness in meeting specific community and individual needs.
- **Loss of identity and autonomy of the programme:** The unique objectives of the European Solidarity Corps, particularly its focus on volunteering and solidarity, could be overshadowed within the larger Erasmus+ framework. Maintaining the European Solidarity Corps as a separate programme allows it to have its own strategic direction tailored to the evolving needs of volunteering and solidarity initiatives. Integration could lead to a loss of this identity and autonomy, potentially making the programme less responsive to the sector’s specific needs.
- **Challenges in budget allocation:** While flexible budget management is an advantage, there is a risk that funding for specific volunteering activities could be compromised or reduced in favour of other education components within Erasmus+.
- **Operational integration challenges:** Integrating the two programmes, each with its own rules, objectives and stakeholder expectations, could lead to operational challenges and confusion for participants and managing bodies.

On the other hand, some respondents suggested that **merging the two programmes could increase visibility and reach more young people and organisations while allowing for economies of scale, greater synergies between the different types of youth actions and offering a more holistic approach to youth, greater budgetary flexibility for National Agencies, and improved coherence of rules:**

- **Increased visibility and clarity:** The European Solidarity Corps could reach more young people and organisations under the well-known Erasmus+ brand, facilitating communication, dissemination and awareness of its opportunities.
- **Programme synergies:** A single programme could foster greater synergies between different types of youth activities, enriching the experience for participants by offering diverse opportunities within a single, coherent framework (see also sections below on potential duplications). An integrated programme combining the non-formal learning opportunities of Erasmus+ with the volunteering and solidarity focus of the European Solidarity Corps could offer a more holistic approach to youth development.
- **Administrative efficiency:** Managing a consolidated programme could simplify the work and potentially reduce administrative complexity for the National Agencies

and participating organisations by merging accreditation schemes/quality labels, facilitating reporting and enabling the use of shared templates.

- **Budgetary flexibility:** Integration could allow for a more flexible reallocation of funds within the broader framework of youth mobility and education, potentially ensuring that resources are used where they are most needed without the rigidity of programme-specific allocations between the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+.

Regardless of the future format of the programme, many stakeholders emphasised that ensuring sufficient funding for its implementation and an appropriate format of activities offered is paramount.

### 2.2.2. EXTERNAL COHERENCE

**There is a high degree of complementarity between the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps and other EU policy initiatives in the field of youth, as well as the European Commission's broader strategic priorities for the period 2019-2024,** in particular, 'a new push for European democracy'. The legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps for the period 2021-2027 explicitly integrates the programme with the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and supports the Youth Action Plan in EU external action for 2022-2027. Compared to the previous programming period, and in line with the increased emphasis on youth engagement<sup>30</sup> in the current EU Youth Strategy, the programme places a stronger focus on the participation of young people in its objectives and actions, with a view to strengthening the active citizenship of its participants and their engagement in democratic life. This indicates a high level of appropriate links with and support for EU policy agendas, while the thematic coverage of the projects indicates an alignment with horizontal EU-level policies and priorities to varying extents (also see section 2.1 on relevance).

While the programme is coherent overall with broader EU policy initiatives in the youth field, there is room for further recognition of the benefits of volunteering and solidarity activities within EU youth employment initiatives. Currently, these frameworks do not explicitly identify volunteering as a potential measure to support NEET (not in employment, education or training) youth, even though the evaluation shows that volunteering is an effective way to contribute to young people's development of personal, professional and educational skills and suggests that participants perceive the programme as an opportunity to improve employment-related competences and thus as a potential bridge between education and the labour market. Strengthening the links between the European Solidarity Corps and EU youth employment initiatives could potentially enhance synergies and support vulnerable youth transitioning to continued education or employment.

#### ***Coherence with other EU programmes***

The European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 is complementary to a number of other relevant EU programmes (see below), as called upon by the programme's legal basis<sup>31</sup>. However, these complementarities are strongest with the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes, and there is room to develop synergies with them further. No concrete examples of duplications were identified.

<sup>30</sup> In particular, overall objectives (1) Enable young people to be architects of their own lives, support their personal development and build up their resilience; and (2) Encourage and equip them with the necessary resources to become active citizens.

<sup>31</sup> 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), 202 OJ L 5 (2021), <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/888/oj/eng>.

**National implementation reports also highlighted a need for better synergies<sup>32</sup>.** Many countries recognised the programme's alignment with national and EU-level initiatives. Still, they recommended the development of better links and coordination efforts with other programmes at the EU and national level. This could avoid potential overlaps and confusion while maximising the impact and overall coherence of the programme.

#### *Erasmus+*

**Both programmes address similar goals and challenges in the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 by supporting youth participation and non-formal learning<sup>33</sup> and raising awareness about existing cross-programme opportunities.** At the same time, while they address similar target groups (including partner regions), the European Solidarity Corps presents lower barriers to participation, making it more accessible to young individuals outside formal institutional frameworks. This is particularly important in achieving the programme's objective of including young people with fewer opportunities, who are more likely to be detached from formal institutional settings. At the same time, the complementarity with Erasmus+ makes it easier for participants from diverse institutional and non-institutional backgrounds to enter this 'cosmos' of EU youth activities and remain engaged across programmes to achieve their goals. This aspect was also highlighted consistently by national and EU-level interviewees, who emphasised that both programmes have a clear, logical link that enables participating organisations to work with young people through different activities.

**Synergies also arise from activities offered by Erasmus+ that support volunteering, such as capacity building** (within both KA1 and KA2) for organisations, which the European Solidarity Corps does not offer. The skills and knowledge gained from Erasmus+ projects and common tools and materials for volunteering improve the quality of European Solidarity Corps activities. However, consultations with national and EU-level stakeholders suggest that these synergies are not promoted or used systematically.

**The programmes also synergise by using shared resources, such as the same (or similar) National Agencies, IT platforms (including the European Youth Portal) and the SALTO network,** which promotes both programmes and supports their implementation and development within the broader context of European youth work. This enables the better use of existing resources and creates an information loop and spaces for collaboration across programmes.

**A potential area for duplication highlighted by interviewees from National Agencies is observed concerning Erasmus+ youth participation activities,** which provide young people with fewer opportunities to engage and learn to participate in civic society through local action, similar to the solidarity projects in the European Solidarity Corps. However, national and EU-level stakeholders also clearly recognised the unique purpose and value of the opportunities offered by the European Solidarity Corps compared to other programmes (see section 2.5 on EU added value). This suggests that potential areas for duplication could be addressed by clarifying their differences and communicating them to potential participants.

#### *Horizon Europe*

In 2023 and 2024, volunteering activities of the European Solidarity Corps received financial support from the Horizon Europe Missions (respectively EUR 16.53 million in 2023

<sup>32</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

<sup>33</sup> Including the common use of Youthpass as a recognition of learning.

and EUR 12.71 million in 2024<sup>34</sup>) through a co-delegation agreement implemented by the European Solidarity Corps National Agencies. **In practical terms, the top-up allows the European Solidarity Corps to offer more volunteering opportunities for young Europeans to address the following priorities: green, health, digital, culture, civil security, and food-bioeconomy.** This synergy has boosted National Agencies' focus on mission priority topics. Moreover, some of the mission priorities (e.g. green and health) are consistent with the priorities of the European Solidarity Corps programme. This coordination shows clear added value in view of a possible continuation of this synergy in the coming years. According to a first data collection carried out in 2023, **the largest share of this co-delegated budget is used by the National Agencies for projects addressing environment-related missions, such as climate change, soil health, oceans and waters, and carbon-neutral cities**<sup>35</sup>.

### *Other programmes*

**Evidence on complementarities or synergies between the European Solidarity Corps and other programmes is limited.** Most interviewees could not comment on them or identify formal actions in this area due to a lack of familiarity with other programmes.

- **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme:** While CERV focuses on promoting citizens' participation in democratic life and raising awareness of the EU's core values, the European Solidarity Corps actively implements those values through volunteer work. While there are instances of National Agencies collaboratively advertising both programmes, this coordinated approach to promotion is not a standard practice.
- **European Social Fund+ (ESF+):** Complementarities with the European Solidarity Corps exist to the extent that the ESF+ has a strong focus on young people, in particular through the Youth Guarantee, which was reinforced with targeted actions and structural reforms to support youth employment, education and training while also strengthening social inclusion.

### ***Coherence with national programmes and initiatives***

The findings of six national case studies and consultations with stakeholders at the national level show that **the European Solidarity Corps plays an important role in the varied national volunteering landscapes, complementing existing national initiatives while remaining distinct in its activities and scope.** Stakeholders clearly distinguish the programme from national initiatives due to its transnational dimension and inclusiveness. The degree of coherence and synergies with national volunteering programmes varies across countries, ranging from overlapping target groups, objectives or activities to serving as a basis for broader EU engagement and local community cooperation. However, while mutually reinforcing interventions exist between the European Solidarity Corps and national programmes, interviewed stakeholders at the EU and national levels primarily identified them as outcomes of specific initiatives or organisations. A lack of awareness about parallel funding opportunities identified by some of the interviewed organisations and National Agencies suggests that there is potential for improved coordination and synergies.

<sup>34</sup> Data provided by DG EAC.

<sup>35</sup> Information provided by DG EAC.

## 2.3. EFFECTIVENESS

### Box 4. Summary conclusions

- The European Solidarity Corps programme is designed **to create a cycle of benefits that permeates through various levels of target groups—individuals, organisations, and communities—resulting in systemic impacts aligned with the Commission’s policy priorities.**
- **Participation contributed to strong individual-level results** such as high satisfaction with their mobility experience, improved personal, professional and study skills, such as independent learning, growth in solidarity, and social and civic awareness, leading to increased engagement in relevant activities after the programme.
- **Organisations recognised improvements** in project planning, implementation, and reporting skills compared to the previous period and noted the positive effects of the Quality Label on their future fundraising and project delivery.
- **The programme impacted community development**, fostering a sense of community, revitalising local initiatives and promoting a broader global perspective, thus facilitating a positive reception of the EU and its values within communities.
- **Organisations, however, faced challenges in working with volunteers with fewer opportunities.** Organisations reported difficulties finding willing consortium partners and receiving sufficient guidance and financial support, underscoring the need for continuous capacity-building and programme support.

### 2.3.1. OUTPUTS

The late adoption of the European Solidarity Corps regulation in May 2021 and the post-COVID-19 effects delayed the programme’s implementation in the 2021-2022 period, and the performance targets were adjusted in 2023 from 280 000 to 185 000 participants<sup>36</sup>. The programme achieved fewer participants than planned in both years, except for the Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas (**Table 4**).

The European Solidarity Corps has consistently met its set targets related to the share of participants with fewer opportunities (see table below)<sup>37</sup>. Yet, the formal target set by the programme is broad and comprises ‘young people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, due to their migrant background, or for reasons such as disability and educational difficulties or for any other discriminatory reason face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities’<sup>38</sup>. In practice, the current method of identifying people with fewer opportunities within the programme, which is the responsibility of organisations during the project implementation, relies on broad criteria and self-reporting, which makes it difficult to assess the programme’s outputs in this aspect (see also section 2.1.42.1.4 on challenges related to the identification of people with fewer

<sup>36</sup> European Solidarity Corps annual work programme 2023

<sup>37</sup> DG EAC. Annual Activity Report 2021 and Annex. EACEA, Annual Activity Report 2021 and Annex.

<sup>38</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/888, Art. 2 (4).

opportunities and 2.5.1 **Error! Reference source not found.**on the background of programme participants).

The number of organisations that have received a Quality Label was highest in 2021 and decreased in 2022. However, the targets for the Quality Labels were set without an ex-ante evaluation due to a lack of data. Estimates have been refined for 2023 and beyond<sup>39</sup>.

The late adoption of the programme resulted in some selections done in 2022, the postponement of contracts and payments to the second half of 2022, and the shifting of planned payments from 2021 to 2022. This situation was exacerbated by budgetary constraints, as payment appropriations in 2022 were allocated to cover that year's commitments and ongoing projects from the previous year<sup>40</sup>. Further analysis of the programme's results will be necessary once the implementation situation stabilises and further criteria adjustments have been made.

For a more detailed analysis of outputs under the humanitarian aid strand, please refer to the findings presented in section 2.4.1 (**Table 5**).

**Table 4. European Solidarity Corps outputs in 2021-2023**

Description	2021		2022		2023	
	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised
<b>Total no. of participants</b>	25 000	18 112	27 223	25 147	25 606	20 403
<b>Solidarity Projects, participants*</b>	9 000	5 164	9 700	7 418	9 100	3 813
<b>Volunteering Projects, participants*</b>	15 000	11 648	16 200	16 016	15 200	14 404
<b>Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas, participants**</b>	1 000	1 300	1 000	1 384	1 000	1 837
<b>Humanitarian Aid Volunteering, participants**</b>	0	0	323	329	306	349
<b>Participants with Fewer Opportunities (%)*</b>	34%	35%	30%	35%	30%	40%
<b>Organisations that have received a quality label for volunteering in solidarity activities*</b>	2 000	2 178	2 100	504	390	258

<sup>39</sup> EU (2023), 'MFF Performance Results Reports', retrieved from [https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Carlberg, M., Plasilova, I., Szolnoki, N. & Zejerman, I. 2023, Research for CULT Committee – EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives: European Solidarity Corps, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels. Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/747261/IPOL\\_STU\(2023\)747261\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/747261/IPOL_STU(2023)747261_EN.pdf)

Description	2021		2022		2023	
	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised
<b>Organisations that have received a quality label for humanitarian aid volunteering**</b>	-	100	100	40	40	30

Note: 'Planned' output numbers are milestones for key performance indicators provided in the MFF Performance Results Reports [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf). 'Realised' numbers of participants are 'contracted forecasted participants'. Data for 2023 is not final, as not all final reports have been submitted.

\*Source: DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024).

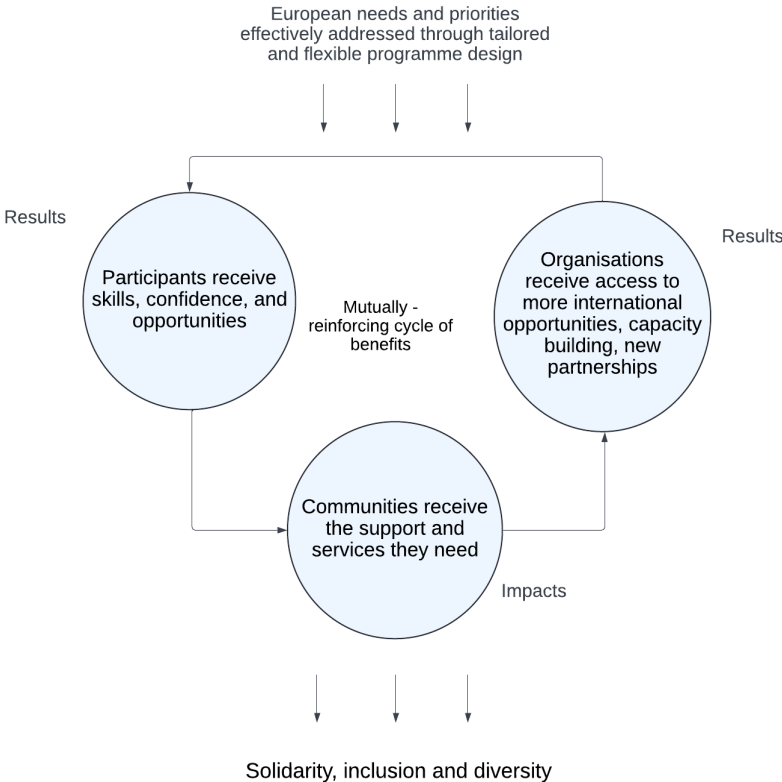
\*\*Source: Data provided by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (data extracted in June 2024).

**2.3.2.RESULTS**

The European Solidarity Corps programme is designed to create a cycle of benefits that permeates through various levels of target groups—individuals, organisations, and communities—resulting in systemic impacts aligned with European values of solidarity, inclusion, and diversity as well as Commission’s horizontal priorities (see figure below).

By connecting organisations and individuals across diverse regions and cultures, the European Solidarity Corps fosters a more integrated and cohesive European Union.

**Figure 6. Mutually-reinforcing cycle of benefits**



Source: PPMI.

## Individual level

At the individual level, European Solidarity Corps programme participants report significant personal, professional, and educational growth. The programme's tailored mobility experiences have led to high satisfaction rates, with 90% (7 659, N=8 551)<sup>41</sup> of surveyed participants acknowledging improved skills, confidence, and opportunities. Key individual benefits include:

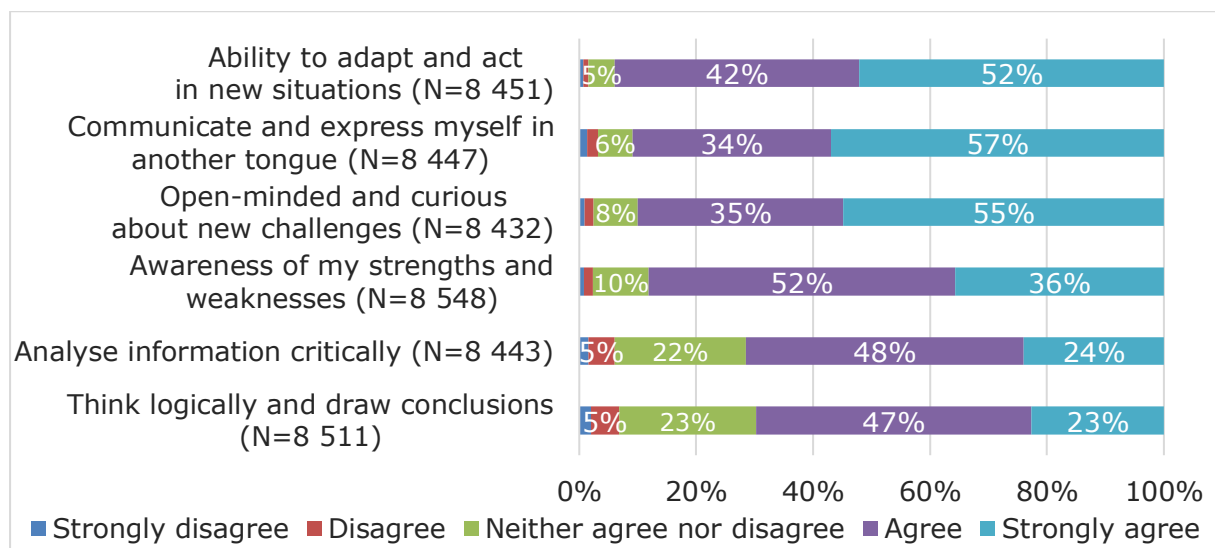
- **Skill Development:** Participants enhance their personal and professional skills, including language proficiency, teamwork, and adaptability.
- **Personal Development:** Beyond skill development, participants experience significant personal growth. This includes improved self-confidence, resilience, and adaptability, which are critical for personal and professional success.
- **Increased Civic Engagement:** There is a marked increase in participants' engagement in social and civic activities, fostering a sense of solidarity and social awareness. This engagement translates into a stronger sense of European identity and an appreciation for democratic values.

### *Skill and personal development*

The European Solidarity Corps improved participants' personal, professional and educational skills, including language skills. It achieved good results by increasing participants' involvement in social, voluntary, solidarity and civic activities and promoting greater tolerance and cooperation between different groups. It successfully developed participants' understanding of key democratic values, increased their environmental awareness, and strengthened their sense of European identity.

**The majority of surveyed European Solidarity Corps participants think the programme has improved their personal skills** (see figure below). Participants especially learnt how to adapt and act in new situations, be open-minded and curious about new challenges, and express themselves in a foreign language.

**Figure 7. Personal improvements after the European Solidarity Corps**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 65 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Through participation in the European Solidarity Corps, I improved my ability to...'

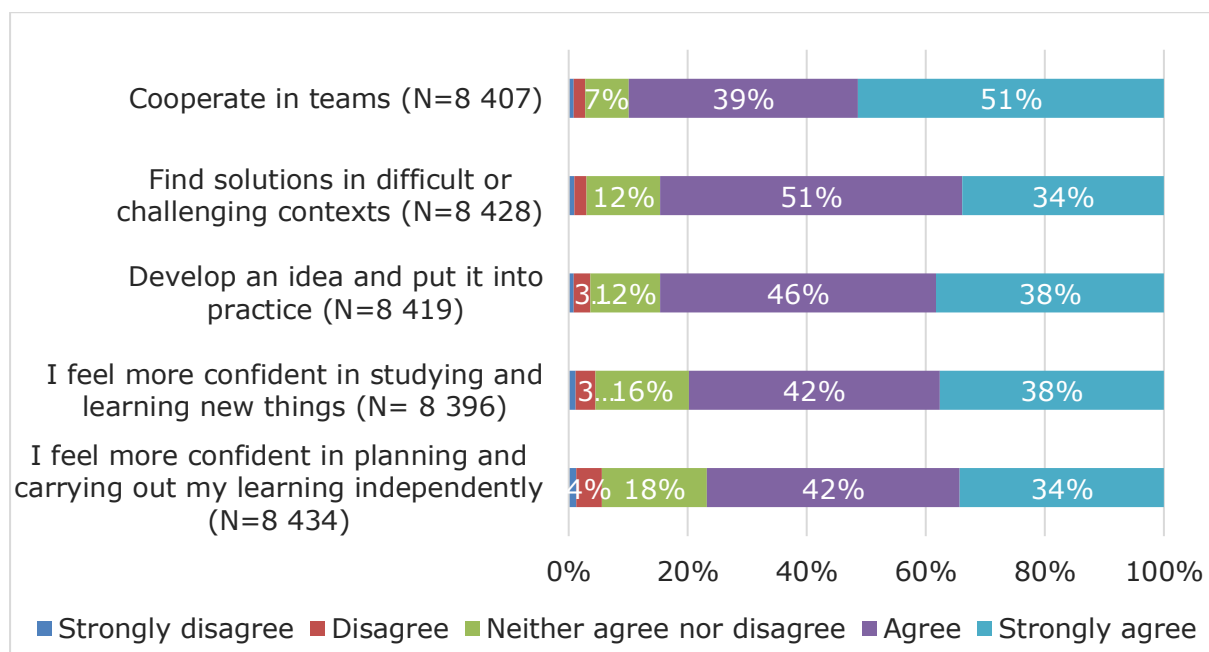
<sup>41</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 65 'Through participation in the ESC I improved my ability to...'

**Moreover, participation improved the participants’ professional and educational skills** (Figure 8), **especially regarding team cooperation**. Moreover, **every third European Solidarity Corps participant studied a new language** at the B2 level after participating in the programme (33%, 3 463, N=10 483)<sup>42</sup>. The majority learned English (28%, 951), Spanish (18%, 619) and French (18%, 603). Improved language proficiency is also a key skill and educational development outcome identified by the counterfactual analysis (see Annex 7).

**Counterfactual analysis (skill development):**

Compared to applicants, European Solidarity Corps participants are 16% (p<0.01) more likely to learn a new language after participating in the programme.

**Figure 8. Professional and educational improvements after the European Solidarity Corps**



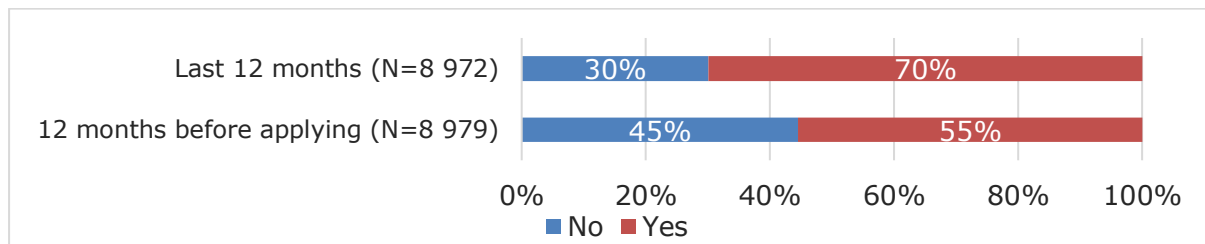
Source: survey of individual participants. Question 65 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Through participation in the European Solidarity Corps, I improved my ability to...'

*Increased civic engagement*

Participants **have become more involved in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities after taking part in the programme** (see figure below).

<sup>42</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 19 'Did you learn any other languages at B2 or higher level since you applied to the programme?'

**Figure 9. Engagement levels in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities before and after participating**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 37 'Were you engaged in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities in the 12 months before applying to become a volunteer with the European Solidarity Corps?' and question 41 'Were you engaged in the last 12 months in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities?'

These findings are also supported by the results of the counterfactual analysis (see Annex 7), which found that compared to applicants, European Solidarity Corps participants are more likely to be engaged in civic activities outside of the programme following their participation.

#### **Counterfactual analysis (civic engagement outcomes):**

Programme participants are 10% ( $p < 0.01$ ) more likely to have done unpaid voluntary community work and 20% ( $p < 0.001$ ) more likely to have participated in civic engagement in recent months.

Moreover, **the programme realised its democratic potential** by developing a better understanding of concepts such as democracy, justice and equality (72%, 6 060, N=8 439) among participants and increasing their willingness to participate in solidarity activities (83%, 6 994, N=8 434)<sup>43</sup>. It also increased participants' awareness of environmental and climate issues (70%, 5 888, N=8 421) and a stronger sense of European identity (71%, 5 959, N=8 404). These individual-level benefits feed into broader organisational and community improvements, creating a ripple effect that reinforces the programme's goals.

In the context of civic engagement, **solidarity projects within the European Solidarity Corps offer a unique added value by providing young people with leadership opportunities, direct access to funding and the chance to address local community needs and inspire wider social change:**

**'We were able to express our concerns about racism in a creative manner without being limited by communication barriers, software, or equipment that we could not afford on our income. Additionally, we have become advocates for change in our communities and workplaces in one way or another. Personally, this has increased my confidence in addressing social issues and has also helped me connect with like-minded individuals on a social level.'** – solidarity project participant

#### **Organisational level**

The European Solidarity Corps has facilitated significant improvements in project management, diversity, and inclusion practices for organisations. The Quality Label, a

<sup>43</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 65 'Through participation in the ESC I improved my ability to...'

programme hallmark, has been instrumental in enhancing project delivery and organisational capabilities. Key organisational benefits include:

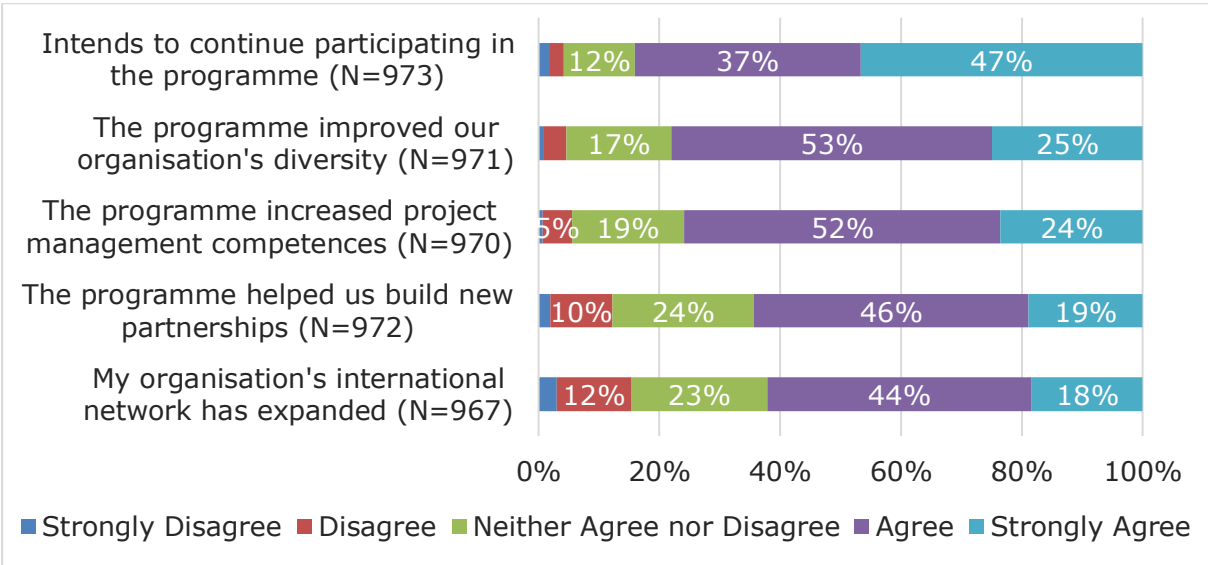
- **Capacity Building:** Organisations report improved project planning, implementation, and reporting skills. The Quality Label has positively influenced their fundraising capabilities and overall project management standards.
- **Inclusivity and Diversity:** The programme has driven organisations to adopt better practices for diversity and inclusion, enabling them to work more effectively with volunteers from various backgrounds, including those with fewer opportunities.
- **International Opportunities:** Organisations gain access to a broader network of international partnerships and capacity-building opportunities, enhancing their ability to deliver impactful projects and sustain their activities beyond the programme’s lifespan.

*Capacity building*

The programme delivered positive results for organisations, such as improving diversity, inclusion and project management skills. The Quality Label is particularly well perceived for its effects on project management practices and recognition. Despite these successes, organisations reported concerns about guidance and financial support to participants with fewer opportunities. However, most acknowledged the programme’s contribution to increasing accessibility and commitment to inclusion.

**Participating organisations generally positively assessed the influence of the programme on them** (see figure below). Organisations regarded the improvement of diversity and inclusion practices and project management skills especially well. Improving diversity practices resulted in a stronger understanding of and skills to work with people of different origins, values, and beliefs. It had a spillover effect on the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities, as some of them come from underrepresented and marginalised communities.

**Figure 10. European Solidarity Corps influence on organisations**



Source: survey of organisations. Question 30 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?’

**The Quality Label received overwhelmingly positive feedback from organisations.**

It promotes the delivery of high-quality solidarity and volunteering activities (71%, 694, N=974)<sup>44</sup> and supports the safety and well-being of volunteers (68%, 666, N=974). In addition, 66% (639, N=968) of organisations felt that the certification process motivated them to continually assess and improve operations.

*Inclusivity and diversity*

The programme demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting people with fewer opportunities. **Four out of five organisations confirmed that the European Solidarity Corps programme effectively supports volunteers with fewer opportunities (80%, 778, N=968)**<sup>45</sup>. A key aspect of the programme's success has been its emphasis on inclusivity, ensuring that the programme reaches a wide range of young people and actively facilitates their participation, regardless of their background or circumstances. Moreover, the programme's effects are particularly valuable for young people with fewer opportunities. The programme has consistently worked to improve skills and competences for personal, educational, social, civic, cultural and professional development.

The programme's projects focus on a wide variety of young people with fewer opportunities. For example, some projects aim to empower young people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, as well as those from migrant backgrounds or with mental health issues, facilitating the development of social skills, cultural integration and freedom of expression. The programme provides a safe space for the personal growth of these youth<sup>46</sup>.

**However, some organisations are not certain that they are well-equipped to support volunteers with fewer opportunities, underscoring the need for continuous capacity-building and programme support.**

Only 58% of the surveyed organisations reported that they were (557, N=962), and 30% claimed that it was easy to find consortium partners who were well-prepared for this task (284, N=937)<sup>47</sup>. Only half of the surveyed organisations agreed that they received sufficient guidance on the inclusion of volunteers with fewer opportunities (50%, 478, N=958). In comparison, an even smaller share of organisations agreed that the financial support (i.e. inclusion support/grants or exceptional costs) provided by the programme was adequate for the participation of this group of volunteers (42%, 399, N=953). This underscores the need for continuous capacity-building opportunities for organisations to strengthen their standing and preparedness to support young people with fewer opportunities.

Currently, the programme provides guidance and resources on inclusion to organisations as part of its Inclusion and Diversity Strategy<sup>48</sup> and through the SALTO Resource Center Inclusion & Diversity. As outlined in the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, National Agencies, Resource Centres and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency should raise awareness of the importance of inclusion and diversity among beneficiaries and promote options and support mechanisms available to organisations. Challenges can potentially also be linked to **the visibility of intersectional and other 'hidden' barriers to the opportunities of young people**, such as mental health issues. The Latvian National Agency's research shows that the programme's youth inclusion efforts focus primarily on

<sup>44</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 25 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label?'

<sup>45</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 34 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the inclusion of volunteers with fewer opportunities in the European Solidarity Corps programme?'

<sup>46</sup> Tanja Strecker, Johannes Eick, RAY SOC – Special Programmatic Study – 2022–2023, 2023. Retrieved from: [https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/RAY-SOC\\_Programmatic-Study\\_20231004.pdf](https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/RAY-SOC_Programmatic-Study_20231004.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 34

<sup>48</sup> See <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-inclusion-and-diversity-strategy>

specific target groups, such as those with geographical, economic or educational barriers, leaving other, more specific groups with limited support<sup>49</sup>. **While the programme appears to be very inclusive in principle, the practical implementation of inclusion measures and, in this context, the support provided to organisations could be further improved to ensure that they have the capacity to support young people with fewer opportunities.**

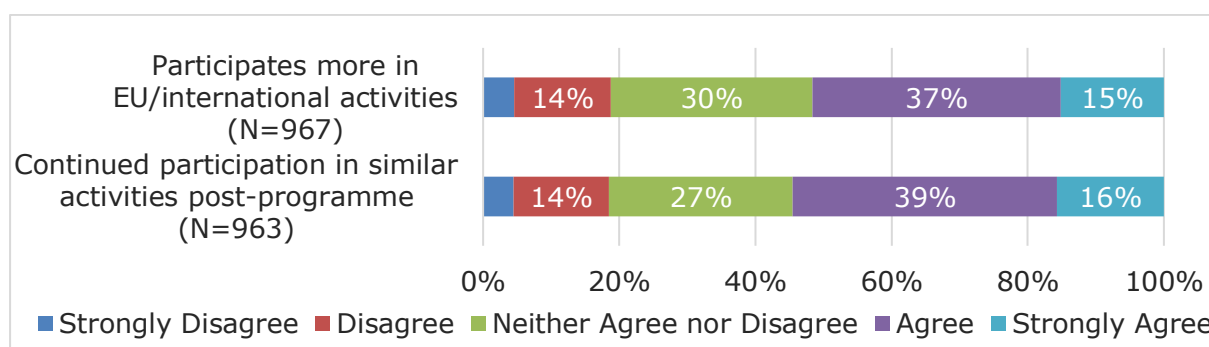
Challenges also remain, particularly for smaller organisations and those in remote areas, which struggle with resource limitations and the high cost of living in urban centres. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maintaining the programme’s positive impacts at the organisational level.

### International Opportunities

**One of the programme’s key benefits is that it enables pan-European networks, leading to long-term partnerships and relationships.** According to survey results, 64% of organisations (626, N=972) either agree or strongly agree that the programme helped build new partnerships that continued post-project<sup>50</sup>. Additionally, 62% (601, N=967) of organisations surveyed either agree or strongly agree that their international network expanded due to programme participation.

**The programme has enabled and incentivised participating organisations to explore similar volunteering and solidarity activities outside the European Solidarity Corps, including internationally.** 55% (525, N=963) reported that their organisation continued to be involved in similar volunteering and solidarity activities after participating in the programme (see figure below). 52% (500, N=967) of organisations indicated that they participated in these activities at the EU or international level after the programme (see also section 2.5 on EU added value). Through learning from their international partners, participating in training programmes, and receiving guidance from their National Agencies and SALTOs, organisations have gained valuable new skills that have become stepping stones to more complex funding programmes. As mentioned above, the Quality Label plays an important role in this, as it motivates organisations to continuously assess and improve their operations and gives them a European accreditation badge to present to potential partners and other funding programmes.

**Figure 11. European Solidarity Corps influence on organisations**



Source: survey of organisations. Question 30 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?’

<sup>49</sup> AIYPLV (2023). Jauniešu ar ierobežotām iespējām sociālās iekļaušanas esošās situācijas kartējums. Retrieved from [https://jaunatne.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/JSPA\\_Ieklausanas-strategija-un-ricibas-plans\\_2023.pdf](https://jaunatne.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/JSPA_Ieklausanas-strategija-un-ricibas-plans_2023.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 30 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?’

### 2.3.3. IMPACTS

The European Solidarity Corps strengthens social cohesion and intercultural understanding and addresses local challenges, especially in areas with declining local volunteering. While successfully fostering community engagement, leadership development and collaborative organisational networks, the programme faced some organisational challenges in adapting to the specific needs of remote or socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Key community impacts include:

- **Addressing Local Challenges:** Particularly in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged areas, the programme addresses local challenges by filling volunteer gaps and enhancing the quality of life. The involvement of international volunteers has been vital in these regions, fostering community spirit and addressing specific local needs.
- **Community Development:** The programme has strengthened social cohesion and intercultural understanding within communities. However, the programme faced challenges in remote areas. Ensuring adequate support and resources for these regions, especially through increased involvement of local organisations, is essential.

#### *Addressing Local Challenges*

**The programme strengthens social cohesion, promotes intercultural understanding and addresses local challenges, especially in rural areas and regions with declining local volunteering. It effectively addresses community or societal challenges and improves the well-being of communities** as individual participants (81%, 6 795, N=8 405)<sup>51</sup> and participating organisations (85%, 752, N=887)<sup>52</sup> agreed. The research team conducted six national case studies to examine the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps in Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and Türkiye. The country-specific examples below come from the assessment of the programme's impact on participating organisations and local communities.

#### *Community Development*

**The programme's contribution to the rural areas goes beyond filling the volunteer gap; it fosters community spirit and addresses the quality of life challenges.** In the Netherlands, for example, local community organisations, such as churches and youth clubs, are crucial in rural areas, where a decline in local volunteers has made international volunteers vital. In Slovenia, the European Solidarity Corps has led to new skills in digitalisation, making the participating organisations important community hubs. The projects have increased the visibility of local stakeholders and inspired other community organisations to undertake similar initiatives.

**The programme's impact is particularly visible in fostering community spirit, revitalising local initiatives and promoting global perspectives.** Participating organisations reported that **the volunteers contributed to a positive attitude towards the EU in the community** (81%, 717, N=884)<sup>53</sup>. Latvia's experience with the European Solidarity Corps highlights its role in promoting intercultural dialogue and broadening horizons, especially for young people with limited travel experience. Volunteers from

<sup>51</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 78 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'

<sup>52</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 31 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on engaged communities and societal groups?'

<sup>53</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 31

diverse backgrounds, such as those from Georgia, provide insights into different political contexts and integration into the community, creating a more global perspective.

**However, the programme faced some challenges in remote and socio-economically disadvantaged areas.** Türkiye's experience shows **that preparing volunteers for the local context requires considerable resources**, and some regions in the country have opted for shorter volunteer stays due to limited socio-cultural opportunities. Some interviews also supported the idea that the impact of the European Solidarity Corps varies according to the local context, particularly the socio-economic difference between Western Europe and the Eastern Neighbourhood. **Ensuring adequate support and resources for these regions, especially through increased involvement and strengthening of local organisations**, is essential for sustaining community-level impacts.

Positive outcomes include the creation of volunteer and activity centres in Turkish urban areas, which enhance community engagement. **The European Solidarity Corps has also facilitated leadership development and knowledge transfer**, with some volunteers establishing similar organisations in their home countries. The programme has fostered a collaborative network of organisations, extending its impact beyond the direct participants and strengthening community cohesion and civic engagement locally and internationally.

#### **Box 5. Examples of rural community impact in the Netherlands and Slovenia**

The Dutch projects have often acted as catalysts for community building and revitalisation, effectively addressing local issues and enhancing residents' well-being. For instance, in a village in Overijssel, a local youth initiative was on the brink of collapse due to a lack of volunteers. A European Solidarity Corps project introduced international volunteers who revitalised the youth club with fresh ideas and perspectives, ensuring its continued existence—something that would have been challenging with only local resources.

In Slovenia, the arrival of a volunteer in a small community led to the entire village practicing English. Local shop employees and the school caretaker, among others, learned basic English to communicate with the volunteer. This project created an 'English corner' where residents could practise the language and engage in activities like a clothes swap shop. The intercultural dimension of these projects was appreciated by the local community.

**The sustainability of projects encountered several challenges at the organisational level.** Smaller organisations with project-based budgets struggled due to limited resources, leading to staff exhaustion and decreased administrative performance. Additionally, the high cost of living in big cities undermines the sustainability of urban projects, as organisations cannot afford to maintain these projects without financial support. The lack of follow-up funding also caused staff turnover in participating organisations, which limited knowledge transfer and threatened sustainability.

In contrast, remote communities with lower living costs and less labour market competition were more likely to sustain their impact, especially when experienced organisations were involved. A notable success story from the programme is the case of MONA in Spain, an organisation that rescues primates from captivity and provides them with a sanctuary. The programme helped Spanish projects successfully internationalise high-impact initiatives and secure additional EU funding after the end of the projects (see the box below).

**To ensure the long-term success and sustainability of projects, it is essential to strengthen organisations in remote communities.** By providing them with the necessary resources, support, and funding, these organisations can continue to thrive and make a significant impact. Investing in remote organisations' capacity-building enhances their sustainability and promotes balanced regional development, ensuring that the benefits of impactful initiatives are felt more broadly.

#### **Box 6. European Solidarity Corps impact on finding additional financial support in Spain**

A former teacher who joined the MONA Training Youth for Conservation as a European Solidarity Corps volunteer helped to create and coordinate a training and exchange programme called 'Monatyc'. Thanks to the volunteer's participation, MONA was able to build a lasting network of conservation centres and learn how to apply for EU funding to set up this programme. Monatyc is now also supported by the Biodiversity Foundation of the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO) within the framework of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan (PRTR), funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU.

In Germany, the European Solidarity Corps has **transformed informal groups into structured organisations and strengthened community ties**. However, these changes were hampered by capacity constraints due to limited resources from smaller participating organisations with project-based budgets, leading to staff burnout and mismanagement. Similarly, in the Netherlands, financial challenges were prominent, with organisations struggling with the high cost of living and inadequate funding, particularly for accommodation, which has directly impacted project sustainability as the **organisers cannot afford to maintain the activities without additional funding**.

In Latvia and Slovenia, the sustainability of project impacts was threatened by **limited knowledge transfer due to wages-induced staff turnover**. Non-governmental organisations faced understaffing, high staff turnover and reliance on precarious funding models. Public organisations have had more stable staffing but were still dependent on European and alternative funding. Nevertheless, organisations that **maintain stable operations, healthy staff engagement, and increased collaboration and community engagement** demonstrated more robust impacts.

In Türkiye, the sustainability of the programme's impact was closely linked to the quality of activities and the availability of follow-up support. The establishment of a National Committee for Volunteering (developed initially based on the European Voluntary Service association) in Türkiye improved the programme's broad institutional impact, though it remains uneven across different regions, with some areas, particularly remote ones, facing challenges in extending these benefits (**Box 7**).

## Box 7. Unintended institutional change in Türkiye

The European Solidarity Corps programme caused an unintended institutional outcome in Türkiye. In urban areas, the establishment of volunteer and activity centres emerged as a direct result of European Solidarity Corps participation, increasing community involvement and creating new platforms for civic participation. The GSM Youth Services Centre partnered with the Mezitli Municipality to establish Mutlu Yaşam Köyü - Happy Life Village, an international youth and volunteer centre that hosts and organises activities, projects and volunteers throughout the year. The programme also inadvertently facilitated leadership development and knowledge transfer. This was evident in cases where volunteers, inspired by their experiences, set up similar organisations in their own regions and countries, thereby extending the impact of the European Solidarity Corps programme beyond the borders of Türkiye.

### *The need to further improve the visibility of the programme to fully reap its benefits*

**The programme's impact can potentially be expanded or improved by a more active online promotion. According to the Eurobarometer survey, young people's awareness of the programme is relatively low, at 8% (N=26 178).** The Erasmus+ programme, which includes DiscoverEU, outperformed the European Solidarity Corps in terms of awareness among young people (49% and 10% for Erasmus+ and its DiscoverEU opportunity against 8% for the European Solidarity Corps)<sup>54</sup>. **There is a need to strengthen awareness-raising and branding efforts at European and national level**<sup>55</sup>. Interviewees highlighted that post-pandemic budget cuts have affected the visibility and outreach of the programme. They identified challenges with the unclear branding of the European Solidarity Corps and called for improved communication efforts and increased funding to ensure that the programme's benefits are well promoted and accessible to a wider audience.

**The need for better awareness and visibility efforts was also raised in the programme's national implementation reports**<sup>56</sup>. In particular, many participating countries advocated for better engagement with potential participants, including young people with fewer opportunities, and strengthening the involvement of local stakeholders and coordination of outreach activities. However, some countries also underlined that the **limited programme budget undermined visibility efforts**, both because it did not provide sufficient funds for the implementation of awareness-raising activities and because the National Agencies could not justify their implementation as they would not have the funds to meet any additional demand.

Social media and the Internet should be the lead platform for the programme's promotion. The survey shows that participants heard about the European Solidarity Corps mainly **through friends, social media and a combination of youth organisations and educational institutions (Figure 12)**. However, their friends could initially learn about the programme on social media, and youth and educational organisations could promote

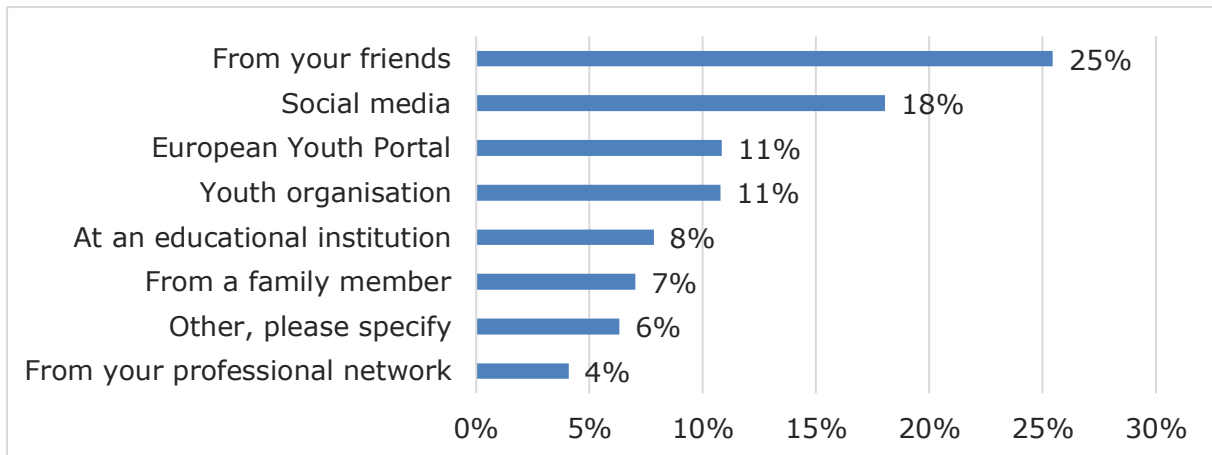
<sup>54</sup> Flash Eurobarometer 545. Youth and Democracy. Eurobarometer. 2024. Retrieved from <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>

<sup>55</sup> Carlberg, M., Plasilova, I., Szolnoki, N. & Zejerman, I. 2023, Research for CULT Committee – EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives: European Solidarity Corps, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels. Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/747261/IPOL\\_STU\(2023\)747261\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/747261/IPOL_STU(2023)747261_EN.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

their activities, including the programme, on social media. Almost all EU youth use social networks and the Internet daily<sup>57</sup>.

**Figure 12. Leading information sources about the European Solidarity Corps**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 24 'How did you first learn about the European Solidarity Corps?'. Please note that items with a value less than 4% are removed from the chart but included in the analysis above. (N=10 355)

**The role of social media in promoting the European Solidarity Corps is further underlined by the results of the social media analysis**, which highlight the importance of using digital platforms to increase the visibility and engagement of the programme (see box below).

#### **Box 8. Social media promotion and visibility of the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2024**

**Social media and the EU website have been key in promoting and increasing the visibility of the European Solidarity Corps programme for 2018-2024.** The analysis shows a high visibility with 79 000 unique mentions and a significant reach, indicating an effective use of social media in promoting the programme. Social media channels such as Instagram, X, and Facebook allow participants to share personal stories and connect with each other, while forums such as Reddit allow potential, current, and former participants to discuss application processes, share experiences, and build a community.

Most of the information presented about the European Solidarity Corps on the different media channels was neutral (89%), followed by positive information and reactions (around 10%). In contrast, only one percent of the mentions of the European Solidarity Corps were presented as negative. **This suggests that one of the main purposes of using media channels for the European Solidarity Corps remains to share information about the programme, encourage participation and promote current and upcoming opportunities.** Social media was one of the key tools to communicate information about funding and financial support, and to promote volunteering opportunities, community engagement, and the value of solidarity.

**To improve the effective use of social media for the European Solidarity Corps**, the programme could develop benchmarks to compare its promotion and visibility, continue to create engaging posts on different social media channels, and plan and

<sup>57</sup> Eurostat. 96% of young people in the EU uses the internet daily, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/dn-20230714-1>

encourage user engagement around events.

**Youth organisations and educational institutions play an important role in sharing information about the programme.** Among surveyed organisations, 83% (800, N=965) indicated that they actively shared the outputs and results of their European Solidarity Corps projects<sup>58</sup>. **However, participating organisations gave a modest assessment of their experience in disseminating the programme results.** Only 41% (399, N=964) agreed or strongly agreed that sufficient funding was available to support the sharing and exploitation of project results. Moreover, 47% (447, N=958) felt that the programme provided adequate guidance on effectively sharing and promoting project activities and results. On the other hand, **more than half of organisations (51%, 490, N=960) shared and used good practices shared by other organisations.** 58% (557, N=962) agreed or strongly agreed that the programme supported sharing best practices and success stories between organisations.

## 2.4. EFFICIENCY

### Box 9. Summary conclusions

- While many participants and organisations found the level of administrative burdens manageable, **there is room to further simplify processes, particularly for organisations and youth-led solidarity projects.**
- **Programme management has been efficient with some caveats, such as the usability of online tools.** Programme participants positively received the collaboration with management bodies, and flexible programme management mitigated the impacts of external shocks like COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the programme.
- **Overall programme funding** was too low compared to the needs and wider programme objectives. Despite the budget increase, due to inflationary pressure, the programme has less money available per year to achieve its goals.
- **Programme implementation** has been very efficient. When adjusting for inflation, the current European Solidarity Corps was twice as cost-effective in terms of participants and 20% more cost-effective per project than the previous European Solidarity Corps period (keeping in mind data discrepancies in the output data of the previous programming period).
- While **IT systems** have improved compared to previous programming periods, their user-friendliness and functionality require further attention.

### 2.4.1. FUNDING

The appropriateness of the budget has been assessed by analysing the appropriateness and proportionality of the budget amount and funding models, compliance with regulations and past programmes, and the rate of financial absorption per initiative and per National Agencies.

**The budget size for the European Solidarity Corps programme has been too small to achieve what it set out.** The programme has had an overall 22% annual budget increase compared to the previous programming period 2018-2020 of approx. €143 million

<sup>58</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 32 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the dissemination and exploitation of the results of the European Solidarity Corps programme?'

per year for 2021-2027 compared to €117 million for 2018-2020<sup>59</sup>. However, the programme has also become more costly to run<sup>60</sup>. The first cost increase was due to inflation, which was 17.4% between 2021 and 2023<sup>61</sup>. Additionally, the European Solidarity Corps chose to fund additional inclusion support of ca. 21% of unit costs to projects with participants with fewer opportunities<sup>62</sup>. This means that despite the budget increase, the European Solidarity Corps (2021-2027) has less money available per year to achieve its goals due to inflationary pressure diminishing a large portion of the budget increase. Additionally, the programme reacted to raising inflation due to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine by adapting its unit costs in 2023 and 2024 but keeping overall funding mostly the same. While higher unit costs made the funding more suitable for participating organisations and individuals, it also meant fewer participants and participating organisations could be supported. Improved financial conditions (level of project grants and/or unit cost rates) have been the most important area for further improvement according to 60% (N=955) of the organisations that participated in the European Solidarity Corps.

**The lack of sufficient funds is highlighted by the fact that the programme is significantly oversubscribed, with the number of applicants far exceeding the number of participants.** Between 2021 and 2023, in total 572 770<sup>63</sup> young people registered on the European Solidarity Corps portal, expressing their interest in participating in the programme, compared to 63 662<sup>64</sup> contracted forecasted participants for the same period. This means that the programme has funded approximately 11% of those who registered. In the **humanitarian aid strand**, interest has surged compared to the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, with nearly 101 049 expressions of interest during 2021-2023<sup>65</sup>, in contrast to the 1 955 deployments planned for the entire 2021-2027 period<sup>66</sup>, indicating that the strand's current budget is insufficient for meeting this high level of demand. This has initially led to bottlenecks and delays in volunteers' training (in particular, the mandatory in-person training). Interviewed organisations and the European Parliament<sup>67</sup> have emphasised the importance of smooth recruitment processes to avoid candidates dropping out due to long waiting times for training.

**The lack of funds and its consequences for the implementation of the programme was also one of the key concerns highlighted by the programme's participating countries<sup>68</sup>.** Most countries noted insufficient funding to meet the programme's objectives, growing demand and rising costs. They emphasised that, in addition to increasing the programme's budget, unit rates should be adjusted continuously with inflation and real costs to ensure that grants remain adequate and ensure the quality and inclusiveness of the programme. Countries also underlined that the lack of funding undermined visibility efforts and reduced the programme's accessibility for organisations and individual participants.

<sup>59</sup> EU (2024), 'European Solidarity Corps – Performance', retrieved from: [https://Commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance\\_en#mff-2014-2020--european-solidarity-corps](https://Commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en#mff-2014-2020--european-solidarity-corps)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Eurostat (2024), 'euroindicators: Annual inflation up to 2.9% in the euro area', retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/18343103/2-17012024-AP-EN.pdf/9d885442-f323-cdde-e149-17ed99a63a6f#:~:text=European%20Union%20annual%20inflation%20was,and%20Belgium%20\(both%200.5%25\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/18343103/2-17012024-AP-EN.pdf/9d885442-f323-cdde-e149-17ed99a63a6f#:~:text=European%20Union%20annual%20inflation%20was,and%20Belgium%20(both%200.5%25)).

<sup>62</sup> EU (2023), 'MFF Performance Results Reports', p. 472, retrieved from [https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 22 April 2024).

<sup>64</sup> DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024).

<sup>65</sup> DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 22 April 2024).

<sup>66</sup> MFF Performance Results Reports, retrieved from [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf)

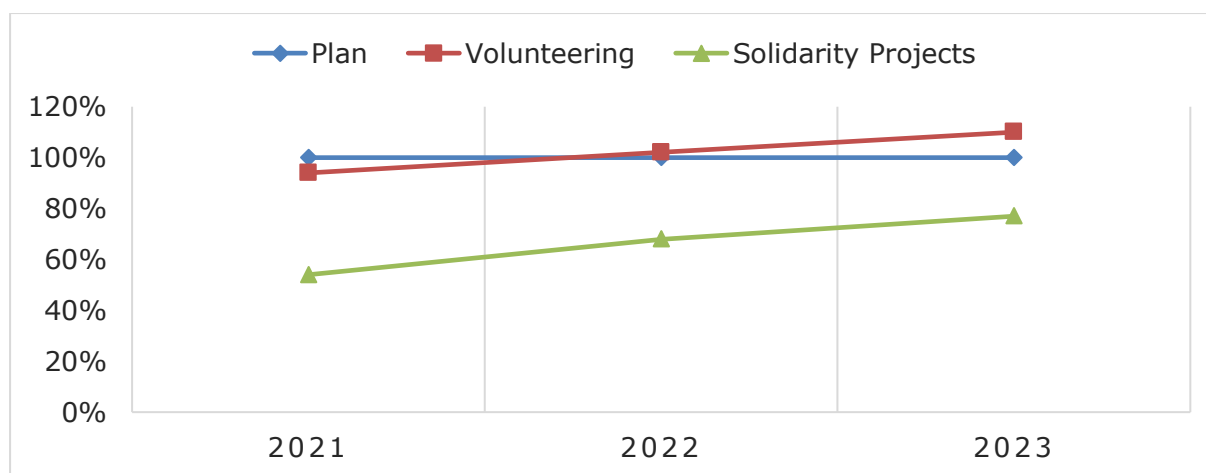
<sup>67</sup> European Parliament resolution of 21 November 2023 on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2027 (2023/2018(INI)) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0410\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0410_EN.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

**While the programme appears to be oversubscribed, the scarce funding has not been fully utilised.** This is caused by a strong oversubscription for volunteering projects, an undersubscription of solidarity projects, and the delayed start of the humanitarian aid strand. While this was initially driven by funds not fully absorbed during the pandemic in 2021 and 2022, they are now being reinjected into the programme and absorbed. The budget intended for solidarity projects that experienced increasing but limited demand was only partially reallocated to the oversubscribed volunteering strand starting in 2023. Similarly, funds initially allocated for the humanitarian aid strand that were not utilised due to its delayed start were reallocated to other strands at later stages (2022 onwards). Furthermore, some countries do not use all of their planned budget, negatively impacting the overall use of funds. On the other hand, countries with much higher demand are not allocated more budget and cannot exceed 100% utilisation.

**To improve efficiency, a readjustment of funds per country could be beneficial<sup>69</sup>.** This would ensure that countries with higher demands have access to the necessary funding while maximising the overall use of funds. Reallocating funds from less popular strands to those in higher demand could significantly improve the programme's efficiency. This would ensure that the resources are being directed where they are most needed and can have the greatest impact. It's a strategic approach that could lead to better outcomes, higher satisfaction rates among participants, and an overall increase in the programme's effectiveness. This adjustment, however, should be done carefully to ensure that no essential activities are left underfunded.

**Figure 13. Financial absorption levels per strand**



Source: PPMI calculation based on DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

**Participating organisations gave modest feedback on the financial aspects of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2023.** 42% (389, N=919)<sup>70</sup> agreed or strongly agreed that the financial support received was sufficient to cover their participation costs. 36% (324) agreed that the unit cost rates were sufficient to cover actual costs. 31% (277) and 35% (324) agreed or strongly agreed that the financial support was sufficient for short-term activities (up to two months) and for longer-term activities (more than two months), respectively.

<sup>69</sup> The allocation of funds is based on a number of criteria which include, among others, country performance weighting 10% of the overall allocation. A readjustment of funds per country would require a readjustment of the criteria and their weight.

<sup>70</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 21 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the financial aspects of the European Solidarity Corps programme during the 2021-2023 period?'

**Funding has been sufficient for individual participants.** Individual participants have expressed satisfaction with the financing, with 74% (6 222, N=8 390) stating that their financial costs for participating in the programme were sufficiently covered, and 24% (6 438, N=8 430) stated that the growing prices of goods and services in recent years affected their participation<sup>71</sup>.

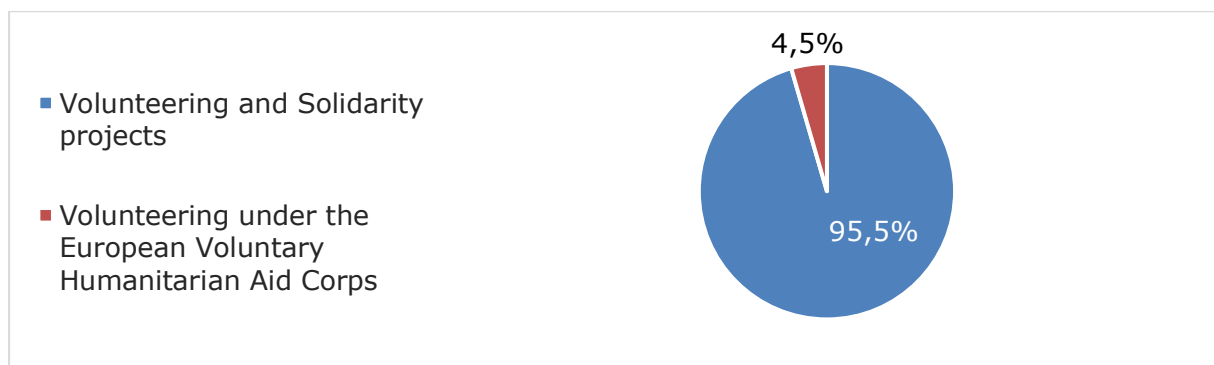
**The budget allocation for the European Solidarity Corps programme has been consistent with the allocation specified in Regulation 2021/888 on the key actions<sup>72</sup>.** The regulation does not specify in detail how the budget should be allocated. However, it does specify how the budget should be indicatively distributed between the different operational objectives organised **under three actions**:

- 94% for Volunteering and Solidarity projects
- 6% for Volunteering under the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps

Within each action, a limit for the maximum amount allocated for in-country volunteering is set out, which is 20%. The regulations have also stipulated in Article 11 (3) that the budget may be used for technical and administrative assistance for the implementation of the programme, such as preparatory, monitoring, control, audit and evaluation activities, including corporate information technology systems<sup>73</sup>, but does not set financial constraints for these. The current amount allocated to in-country volunteering is, as of January 2024, at 8.1%, well within its designated limits<sup>74</sup>.

When excluding the unspecified budget for technical and administrative assistance, the planned budget share allocated across years to volunteering and solidarity projects (95.5%) has been slightly higher than the 94% share requested in the Regulation. Yet, commitments closely mirrored the expected percentages: 4.5%, as opposed to 6%, have been given to the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps so far. This difference can be explained by the delayed start of the humanitarian aid strand in 2022, which aims to increase the allocation over the following years.

**Figure 14. Actual budget share of the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027**



Source: DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

<sup>71</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 80 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements on the efficiency of the programme?'

<sup>72</sup> EU (2021), 'Regulation (EU) No 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), retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32021R0888>

<sup>73</sup> EU (2021), 'Regulation (EU) No 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), Article 11 (3), retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32021R0888>

<sup>74</sup> PPMI calculation based on internal monitoring dashboard: The European Solidarity Corps 21-27 Country Allocation & performance dashboard and CountryVOL extracted from the E+ and Solidarity Corps (MFF 2021 - 2027) Dashboard.

**The rationale behind the budget allocation in relation to expected activities and outcomes has been unclear.** The Annual Work Programmes over 2021-2023 have not been specific about the levels of outcomes, such as the skills acquired through its activities, that the European Solidarity Corps was expected to achieve. Each of the Annual Work Programmes has described expected results in a generic manner without setting concrete targets, for example, for the expected number of participating organisations to be reached in a given year<sup>75</sup>. This made it difficult to judge whether the budget aligned with the expected outcomes and the changes the programme sought to achieve.

First, it is recommended that the rationale behind budget allocation be clearly articulated in relation to expected activities (e.g., the number of trainings planned per stakeholder) and outcomes (e.g., the expected learning outcomes of these trainings). This would provide a clear understanding of how resources are utilised and the value they are expected to bring. In addition, the Annual Work Programmes need to be more specific about the levels of outcome that the European Solidarity Corps is expected to achieve. This would set a clear path for the programme and allow for better planning and execution of activities. Lastly, the expected results ought to be described concretely with set targets. This would make it easier to measure success and align the budget with the expected outcomes and changes the programme seeks to achieve.

**Financial absorption levels across all action types have been mixed.** While the budget allocated to volunteering in each annual work plan has been close to 100%, the budget allocated to solidarity projects has repeatedly fallen short of its goal, averaging 67%, getting 10% closer to full absorption every year<sup>76</sup>. A lack of awareness of solidarity projects among young people and high barriers to participation contribute to the limited take-up of the action (see section 2.4.2. for further details). When interviewed, organisations often stated that motivating young people to join their existing European Solidarity Corps volunteering projects with a clear structure compliant with the programme was easier than convincing them to set up a solidarity project by themselves<sup>77</sup>. As a result, volunteering was able to overshoot its absorption levels by 10% in 2023 without causing problems for the overall budget. **Financial absorption levels across National Agencies have not been reliably comparable due to reporting issues.** The reporting issues across National Agencies need to be addressed to ensure reliable comparability. This may require more time and resources, but it is crucial for accurately tracking and managing financial absorption levels.

### ***Humanitarian aid strand***

**For the humanitarian aid strand, organisations have provided positive assessments of their experience so far, considering it an improvement in most areas compared to the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative.** Organisations appreciated simplified application and reporting procedures, greater user-friendliness of IT systems, and clearer financial rules (see figure below). While organisations have had a more positive experience overall compared to the previous programme, some perceived a noticeable worsening of conditions in the financial support provided by the humanitarian aid strand.

At the same time, compared to participants of other actions, **organisations involved in the humanitarian aid strand of the programme were particularly critical of the financial support they received.** Of those surveyed, 44% (15, N=34) disagreed that the financial support was sufficient, while 62% (21, N=34) felt that the unit cost rates were

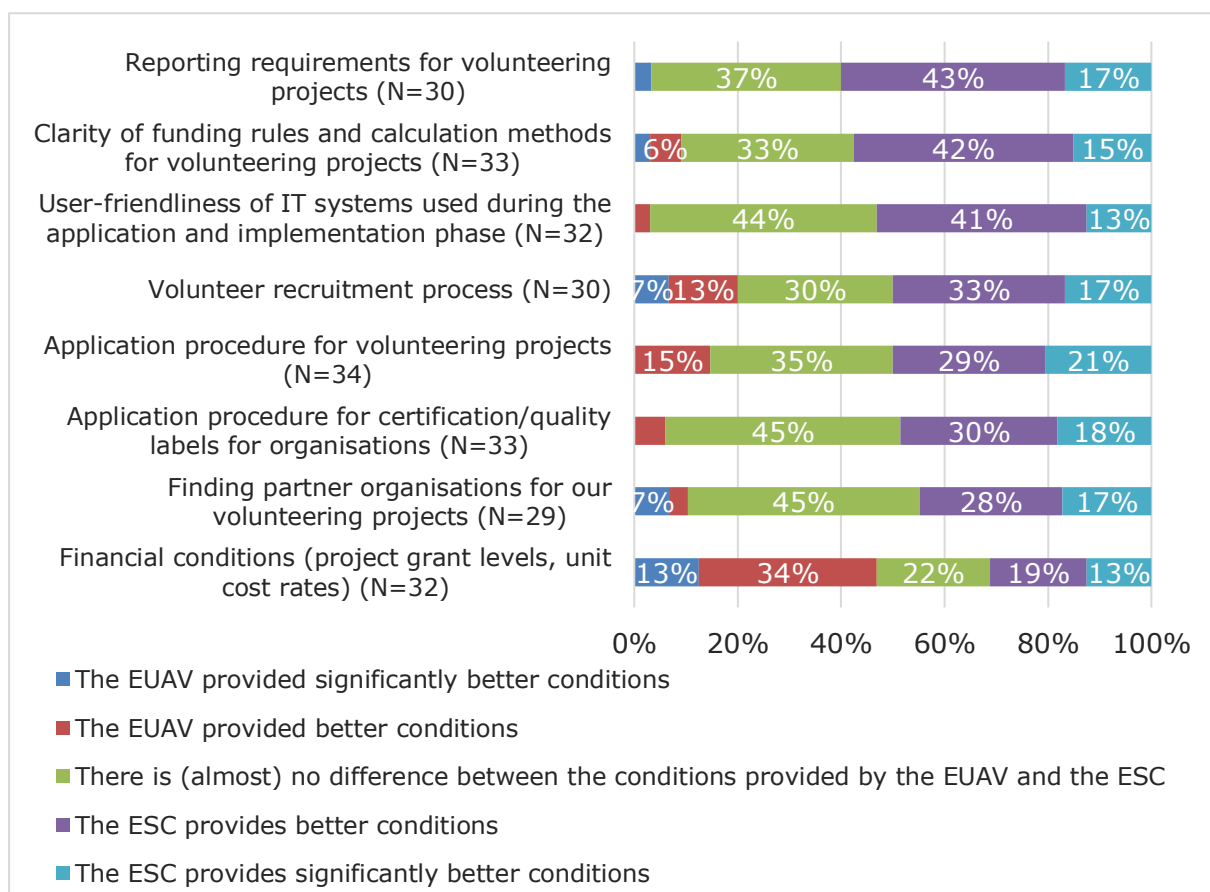
<sup>75</sup> European Solidarity Corps Annual Work Programmes (2021-2023)

<sup>76</sup> PPMI calculation based on DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024) and the Annual Work Plan 2021-2023

<sup>77</sup> Interview Programme

too low<sup>78</sup>. In addition, improving financial conditions was the most frequently cited area for improvement by organisations (71%, 34, N=48)<sup>79</sup>. Organisations agreed that the programme’s financial rules had been simplified, especially compared to the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative. However, many of them emphasised that the available budget did not keep up with the increasing costs of living since the inception of the current European Solidarity Corps programming in 2021 and is not proportionate to the time and resources required from local staff to manage and build the capacities of volunteers. Hosting and supporting organisations also stressed that the budget was insufficient to cover volunteer relocation or drop-out contingencies. **However, despite mixed views on funding, the strand has been more successful in attracting organisations than its predecessor** (see section below).

**Figure 15. Organisations’ assessment of conditions offered by the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative and the European Solidarity Corps humanitarian aid strand**



Survey of organisations. Question 44 'Your organisation has participated in the EU Aid Volunteers initiative (EUAV) and is currently also taking part in the European Solidarity Corps humanitarian aid volunteering (Solidarity Corps). From your perspective, how would you compare the conditions for your organisation offered by the programmes in the following areas:'

One possible reason for the mixed opinion of organisations on the level of funding is that while the unit costs of the strand are based on the funding provided under the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, they do not include funding for technical assistance and capacity-building projects, which are no longer provided under the new strand. While the level of

<sup>78</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 43 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the financial support provided by the European Solidarity Corps programme?'

<sup>79</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 53 'In your opinion, which of the following aspects of the European Solidarity Corps humanitarian aid strand should be improved to maximise the impact of the programme?'

funding per project is expected to be somewhat lower than under the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, the number of projects selected is expected to be higher, allowing more organisations to participate in the strand and thus improving its cost-effectiveness.

**The results of the most recent calls for deployment projects suggest that, despite mixed views from organisations on funding, the strand has been more successful in attracting organisations than its predecessor.** The former initiative had attracted 37 proposals for deployment projects in 2015-2019 and awarded 32 contracts for the deployment of 1 173 volunteers<sup>80</sup>. In comparison, as shown in the table below, the humanitarian aid strand received 49 applications in 2022-2023, of which 25 were selected. In addition, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency awarded quality labels for humanitarian aid volunteering to 170 organisations in 2021-2023.

**Table 5. Results of calls for applications under the humanitarian aid strand, 2021-2023**

		2021	2022	2023
<b>Quality humanitarian aid label</b>	Applications received	120	73	75
	Applications approved	100	40	30
<b>Humanitarian aid volunteering</b>	Applications received	-	18	31
	Applications approved	-	11	14
	No of volunteers foreseen (approved projects)	-	329	349

Source: data provided by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (data extracted in June 2024). Selections for 2024 (outside of the evaluation period) are still ongoing (43 applications for humanitarian aid volunteering were received).

#### 2.4.2. ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

**Overall, while many participants and organisations found the level of administrative burdens manageable, there is room to further simplify processes, particularly for organisations and youth-led solidarity projects.**

**Participation in the European Solidarity Corps was generally not considered overly burdensome by most participants**, with 66% (5 560, N=8 393)<sup>81</sup> of individual participants and 56% (515, N=920)<sup>82</sup> of participating organisations viewing the administrative tasks and reporting requirements as reasonable. This represents only a slight increase in satisfaction for participants and stability for organisations compared to the previous programming period.

**Participating organisations had a more nuanced assessment of the programme's support.** Experienced organisations reported several improvements, notably simplifications in project proposal, implementation, and reporting, compared to the 2018-2020 period. A total of 51% (363, N=717) confirmed that the programme has simplified

<sup>80</sup> ADE (2021). 'Ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1d172a85-0b96-11ec-adb1-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

<sup>81</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 80 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements on the efficiency of the programme?'

<sup>82</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 19 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps project management and reporting procedures during the 2021-2023 period?'

the process of preparing and submitting project proposals<sup>83</sup>. In addition, 40% (288, N=712) noted that the project implementation and reporting processes had been streamlined. The simplification of project funding mechanisms was acknowledged by 45% (319, N=709), while 40% (286, N=713) noted the increased visibility of the programme. The programme's accessibility for newcomer organisations was recognised by 36% (256, N=707). In addition, 39% (274, N=710) noted improvements in the user-friendliness of the guidance materials, and 32% (227, N=706) agreed that the IT systems/tools used during project application and implementation had improved in terms of user-friendliness.

**The 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps Quality Label application process received a moderately positive assessment**, with 62% (490, N=792)<sup>84</sup> of organisations finding the information provided to applicants clear and easy to understand. However, only 51% (402, N=794) considered the guidance and support tools easy to use, and 63% (N=793) reported that the application process required significant effort, underscoring concerns about the administrative workload.

**For project applications, 60% (557, N=931) of organisations agreed that the information provided was clear, but only 49% (458, N=933) found the guidance and support tools user-friendly<sup>85</sup>**. While 57% (531, N=929) found the funding rules clear, 48% (445, N=924) noted that the application process required considerable effort. Additionally, fewer organisations (49%, N=922) compared to the previous period (-10%) felt that the administrative requirements were proportionate to the funding requested. In the interview programme, long-term participating organisations claimed that while the number of aspects to report on has decreased over the years, the burden of proof per claim (financial or activity) has increased for organisations<sup>86</sup>.

**The project management and reporting procedures were met with mixed reactions**, with only 40% (367, N=928) of organisations finding it easy to recruit volunteers through the European Solidarity Corps portal<sup>87</sup>. While 56% (515, N=920) agreed that the reporting requirements were reasonable, only 36% (329, N=922) found the Beneficiary Module user-friendly, underscoring concerns about their usability and performance (see section 2.4.4.).

The need to reduce administrative burdens during the project application and implementation was also highlighted by participating countries, with many national implementation reports describing processes as rather complex and burdensome, particularly for less experienced organisations and individuals<sup>88</sup>. While they recognised improvements to final reporting and application processes, many countries made detailed recommendations to reduce bureaucracy, streamline procedures and improve accessibility and clarity for individual participants and organisations.

## **Solidarity projects**

Solidarity projects within the European Solidarity Corps **offer added value by providing young people with leadership opportunities, direct access to funding and the**

<sup>83</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 46 'Compared to the 2018-2020 period, the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme underwent several changes, including the integration of the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and the EU Aid Volunteers initiative (EUAV) into the European Solidarity Corps. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Compared to the 2018-2020 period, the current European Solidarity Corps programme...'

<sup>84</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 15 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label application procedure for the 2021-2027 period?'

<sup>85</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 17 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps project application procedures during the 2021-2023 period?'

<sup>86</sup> Interview Programme

<sup>87</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 19 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps project management and reporting procedures during the 2021-2023 period?'

<sup>88</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

**chance to address local community needs and inspire wider social change** (see also section 2.3.2.). This was also confirmed by interviews with external experts and National Agencies, who highlighted solidarity projects as a unique opportunity for youth within wider EU funding programmes. Among survey respondents who had participated in solidarity projects, 78% (1 250, N=1 599) agreed or strongly agreed that these projects meet the needs of young people<sup>89</sup>.

To fully exploit the opportunities offered by solidarity projects, there is room to further improve their visibility and accessibility. While stakeholders consider solidarity projects as the programme's potentially most inclusive opportunity (by offering in-country and short-term projects) for young people, the action has seen notably lower uptake than foreseen, as described in previous sections. **A lack of awareness of solidarity projects among young people and high barriers to participation contribute to the limited take-up of the action.** Of young people surveyed who had participated in solidarity projects, 77% (1 156, N=1 588) agreed or strongly agreed that solidarity projects lack visibility, and 70% (1 122, N=1 605) considered them challenging to initiate without the support of an organisation, confirmed by similar levels of agreement among the organisations surveyed.

**While promoting solidarity projects is crucial, the lack of adequate funding for the programme undermines such efforts.** Furthermore, despite the intention to be inclusive and youth-centred, **high administrative requirements**, such as detailed application forms in English, pose significant barriers<sup>90</sup>. In addition, as noted by interviewed external experts, the minimum requirement of five participants for a project can be discouraging, as not every young person is as connected. **While these projects could be attractive to young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities, their requirements and low visibility thus limit their reach and accessibility.**

**'[There is] too little focus on young people who carry out [European Solidarity Corps] projects independently [and] insufficient educational work on legal/administrative processes. Simplify processes! For people like me, who only managed this project on a voluntary basis, it was a huge amount of work.'**  
– solidarity project participant

**There is also a need for more guidance and facilitation for solidarity projects.** Currently, the main mechanisms for this are organisations that can help young people with their application and other administrative steps and coaches who provide support throughout the project. However, the organisations interviewed and surveyed note that their role requires considerable effort and resources on their part. Not all organisations may have this capacity, especially in the broader context of beneficiaries' mixed views on funding levels. At the same time, more than 40% (646, N=1 573) of surveyed participants said that their project had not been supported by a coach<sup>91</sup>. This low take-up suggests that their visibility and accessibility could be improved. Currently, there are no lists or pools of coaches and young people are expected to identify and involve the coach in their project themselves<sup>92</sup>.

<sup>89</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 84 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your solidarity project(s)?'

<sup>90</sup> Based on answers to open-ended survey and public consultation questions and interviews with experts and participating organisations.

<sup>91</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 82 'Was/were your solidarity project(s) supported by a coach?'

<sup>92</sup> Pintea, Ples and Markovic (2023). Mentoring and coaching within the solidarity corps. <https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4435/Mentoring%20Report%2020230517.pdf>

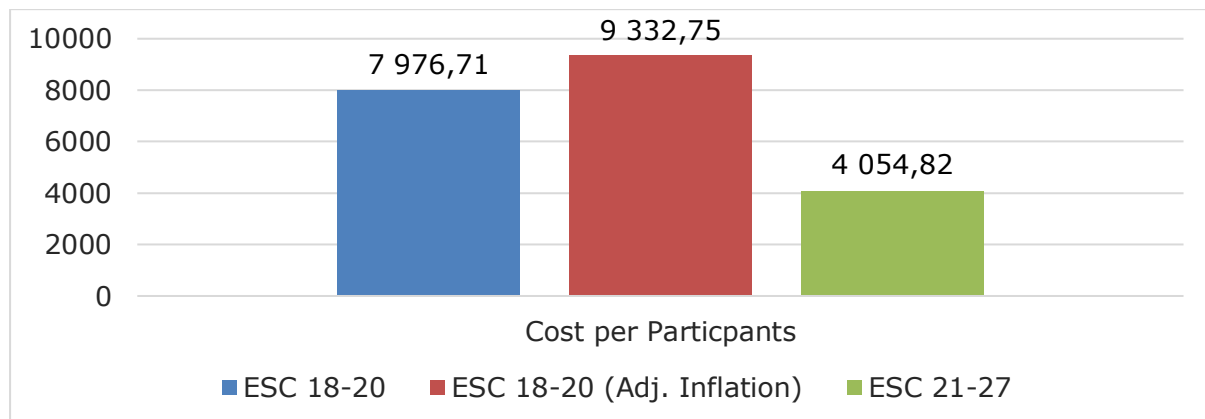
### 2.4.3. EFFICIENCY OF PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

#### *Cost-effectiveness of the programme*

**The European Solidarity Corps has been cost-effective with some limitations.** There are great variations in cost-effectiveness between the operational actions. This variation is to be expected as the varying nature of the actions requires different efforts to realise them. For instance, the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps has greater mobility distances, which come with greater costs, while solidarity projects require less infrastructure than the other actions.

**Comparing the cost-effectiveness of the ongoing European Solidarity Corps (2021-2027) to its previous iteration is difficult due to slight data discrepancies in the output data of the previous programming period.** When comparing cost-effectiveness, the current European Solidarity Corps has managed to be roughly twice (2.01x) as cost-effective when it comes to participants when adjusting for inflation with a cost of € 4 054 per participant. Additionally, cost-effectiveness has been roughly 20% higher when looking at projects with the programme achieving a cost of € 39 594.15 per project compared to the previous € 47 629.09 (adjusted for inflation). Without adjusting for it, the difference was closer to 3%. Given the expanded scope of the programme, however, a simple cost-effectiveness comparison between the two programmes is a somewhat flawed comparison.

**Figure 16. Cost-effectiveness per participant between programming periods**



Source: PPMI calculation based on DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

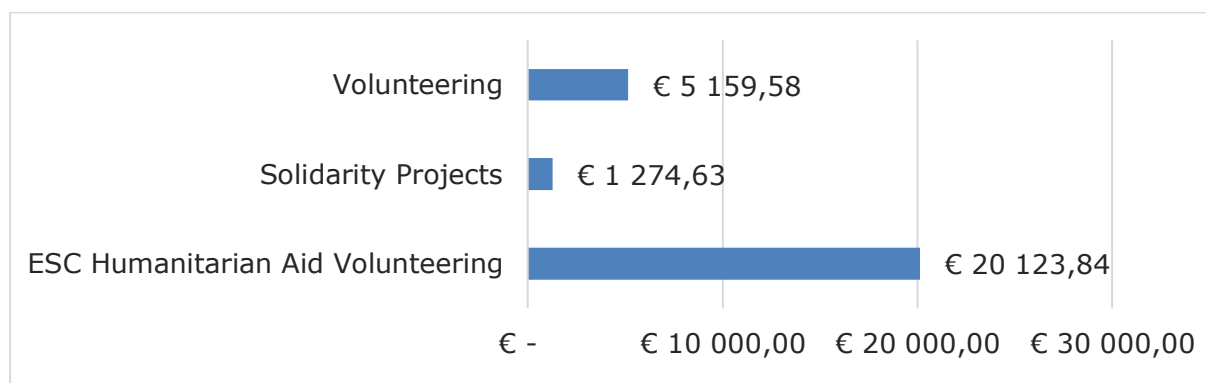
**When comparing the cost per participant, the European Solidarity Corps has been the most cost-effective in its solidarity projects and the least in the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps strand.** Solidarity Projects have been extremely cost-effective and managed to average a cost of € 1 274.63 per participant. Second was the volunteering action at a cost per participant of € 5 159, whereas the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps strand has been the least cost-effective, requiring € 20 123.84 per participant<sup>93,94</sup>. The higher cost of this strand compared to the rest of the programme is due to the specific requirements of humanitarian volunteering and the associated costs. These include the need for and cost of centralised training, higher unit costs based on the level of costs observed under the EU Aid Volunteers initiative, and the geographical scope of the volunteering activities, which take place mainly in third countries

<sup>93</sup> PPMI calculation based on 2023 MFF Performance Results Report and DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

<sup>94</sup> It should be noted that the European Humanitarian Aid Corps is currently at an early stage of development (volunteers started to be deployed in mid-2023) and only one full year of data is available for analysis.

in Latin America, Africa and Asia. One possible way of improving the cost-effectiveness of the strand could be to reduce the cost of the physical pre-departure training provided by some projects by moving it online (rather than face-to-face). Similarly, for the programme's next iteration, consideration could be given to increasing the use of online training modules for central training activities.

**Figure 17. Cost-effectiveness per participant per strand**



Source: PPMI calculation based on DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2021-2027; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

**Overall, the European Solidarity Corps has been more cost-effective than comparable international programmes**, such as International UN Youth Volunteers, with a cost-effectiveness of roughly € 44 654 per volunteer in 2021<sup>95</sup>. Even the European Solidarity Corps' most comparable European voluntary humanitarian aid strand is about twice as cost-effective.

**The assessment of the extent of the implementation of actions in direct and indirect management having been appropriate, efficient, and well-functioning has been inconclusive** due to a lack of data about the actual budget spent under direct management actions (for example, on insurance).

### ***Efficiency of quality and support measures***

**The European Solidarity Corps invested significant resources in preparing quality reference documents that have been useful to the implementation of the programme.** The programme has spent approximately 10% of its yearly budget, or € 16 million yearly, on training<sup>96</sup>. This work contributed to developing key features of the programme, among them the careful considerations for volunteers' security, uniform approach to volunteer training, certification processes for organisations, volunteer management, and the governance of partners. These elements have contributed to the effectiveness of the European Solidarity Corps.

**Participants in the horizontal training activities (general online training and online language support) of the programme, managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, are generally satisfied with the support they received**, with 71% (2 079, N=2 939) indicating that they were satisfied with the general online training. Participants in online language support were more modest in their assessment. While 47% (805, N=1 705) were satisfied with the support, 27% (455) were dissatisfied. There may also be room for improvement in engagement and completion rates, as only 35% (2 959, N=8 531) of participants participated in the general online training.

<sup>95</sup> PPMI calculation based on UN (2021) '2021 Proforma table for UN International Volunteers Youth'

<sup>96</sup> European Solidarity Corps Annual Work Programmes (2021-2023)

This is consistent with a participation rate of 36% (1 706, N=4 697) for online language support (among respondents who had received some form of linguistic support), suggesting that this content may not be engaging, relevant or accessible to all<sup>97</sup>.

**Participants were also generally satisfied with the European Solidarity Corps insurance** (67%, 4 284, N=6 423) managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency<sup>98</sup>. However, in response to open survey questions and during interviews, numerous organisations and National Agencies spontaneously raised potential concerns regarding changes in insurance providers starting from February 2023, which primarily focused on a lack of effective support and responsiveness. Organisations highlighted difficulties in contacting customer service, receiving timely email responses, and receiving enrolment certificates in time (especially relevant for volunteers requiring a visa to participate). In addition, they noted challenges in the reimbursement of payments, especially for volunteers from partner countries. Some interviewed National Agencies noted that insurance issues are particularly burdensome for participants with fewer opportunities for whom they can pose a significant obstacle.

**Quality label and networking activities have been very cost-effective.** On average, the European Solidarity Corps spent 4.5% of its budget or € 6.5 million on the quality label and networking activities. These activities have been appreciated by organisations, with 62% (N=967)<sup>99</sup> of organisations reporting that their international network has expanded as a result of their participation in the programme. Moreover, the **quality label operations are successful**, with only 5% (42, N=974)<sup>100</sup> of organisations disagreeing that the quality label supports the provision of high-quality solidarity and volunteering activities and the safety and well-being of volunteers. The quality label has encouraged organisations to keep assessing and improving their operations, with two-thirds of organisations saying so (66%, 639, N=968).

**The training and recruitment procedures for volunteers under the humanitarian aid strand have been revised compared to the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative to improve accessibility and transparency, and to reduce the time between application and deployment.** Previously, organisations pre-selected volunteer candidates to be trained, whereas now the training is open to all applicants who, after completing the training, become available for recruitment by organisations. Organisations expressed mixed views on these changes. Of the organisations surveyed, 15 (N=30) agreed that the recruitment of volunteers had improved compared to the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative (6 disagreed), indicating that this change had streamlined the recruitment process and increased the pool of available volunteers<sup>101</sup>. At the same time, some organisations expressed concern that the new procedures might make volunteer candidates less committed, taking training places away from genuinely interested candidates and slowing down the recruitment process<sup>102</sup>. One organisation suggested that it would be useful to be able to filter trained candidates based on their availability, as sometimes candidates do not plan to volunteer immediately after completing their training<sup>103</sup>.

<sup>97</sup> Survey of individual participants. Questions 72-76

<sup>98</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 71 'How satisfied were you with the European Solidarity Corps insurance?'

<sup>99</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 30 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?'

<sup>100</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 25 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label?'

<sup>101</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 44 'From your perspective, how would you compare the conditions for your organisation offered by the programmes in the following areas:'

<sup>102</sup> Interview programme and answers to open-ended survey questions

<sup>103</sup> Interview programme

#### 2.4.4. EFFICIENCY OF PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Three key factors measure the efficiency of programme management: firstly, the efficiency gains of the use of programme management tools; secondly, the efficacy of cooperation among stakeholders; and thirdly, the efficiency of support provided by implementation bodies.

##### *IT tools*

The assessment of the efficiency of the programme management tools shows a mixed performance, with the application portal standing out as a more positively received component, while the beneficiary and reporting tools attracted more criticism. Several key concerns were raised about the beneficiary and reporting modules, reflecting significant user dissatisfaction.

##### *Application tools*

**The programme's application tools have been received more positively than in the previous programming period, but there is room to further simplify them for organisations.** Half of the organisations (49%, 458, N=933) have found the IT tools for project applications to be user-friendly, while 40% (367, N=928) of organisations said that it was easy to find volunteers through the European Solidarity Corps Portal (38% neither agreed nor disagreed)<sup>104</sup>. Corresponding to this, only 20% (450, N=923) of organisations further stated that the time it took to recruit volunteers had not met their needs<sup>105</sup>. There seemed to be, however, some overlap between portal functions and supporting organisations, with organisations reporting that they still often referred to their networks to gain additional information on candidates. Organisations indicated that the information on prospective participants on the portal was rather superficial and that the tool required improved searching and filtering functionalities<sup>106</sup>. Organisations assessed the level of support provided by support organisations positively (64%, 417, N=648)<sup>107</sup>. Overall, individual participants positively assessed the European Solidarity Corps portal<sup>108</sup>.

##### *Beneficiary and reporting tools*

**Although the beneficiary and reporting tools have become more mature and stable since 2023, there are still challenges in terms of usability and reliability.** Surveyed organisations provided mixed feedback on the Beneficiary Module: while 36% (329, N=922) of organisations found it user-friendly, another 30% (272) disliked it<sup>109</sup>. National implementation reports frequently highlighted that these tools were cumbersome to work with, overly complex, and experienced bugs that affected key functionalities<sup>110</sup>. During interviews, organisations noted that these bugs hampered their work and that the temporary unavailability of reporting tools created significant challenges for users attempting to upload their reports.

Other criticisms focused on the overall inefficiency of the IT system. Many National Agencies felt that the programme tools failed to streamline project management processes

<sup>104</sup> Survey of organisations. Questions 17 and 19

<sup>105</sup> Survey of organisations. Questions 19 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps project management and reporting procedures during the 2021-2023 period?'

<sup>106</sup> Interview programme

<sup>107</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 26 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your experience hosting European Solidarity Corps volunteers?'

<sup>108</sup> Survey of individuals. Question 79 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps portal (Youth Portal)?'

<sup>109</sup> Survey of organisations, Question 19 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps project management and reporting procedures during the 2021-2023 period?'

<sup>110</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

effectively and were too complex for the target user groups<sup>111</sup>. They emphasised that the shortcomings of the IT tools had led to inefficiencies at all programme levels, causing delays and dissatisfaction among users. A few countries also highlighted the need for better interoperability and synchronisation of IT tools, as the current lack of integration between different systems creates additional administrative burdens and inefficiencies.

### ***Cooperation between stakeholders and quality of support***

#### **Cooperation between different national management bodies has been efficient.**

This view has been shared by both the stakeholders involved and participating organisations. Organisations were overwhelmingly satisfied with the quality of support and the responsiveness of National Agencies and/or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). 75% (656, N=875) have stated that the level of support provided by National Agencies and/or EACEA during the project has been good. Additionally, 74% (645, N=871) stated that the responsiveness of the National Agencies and/or EACEA in answering questions was good<sup>112</sup>.

**Interviewed National Agencies and authorities described their collaboration with each other and with the Commission as efficient. They agreed that the Commission was responsive and helpful in dealing with requests while showing great flexibility during crises<sup>113</sup>.** The only criticism mentioned during interviews was that the Commission had been too slow in adapting unit costs in 2022, and one Member State decided to unilaterally step in to support hosting organisations in their country with a national cost compensation programme<sup>114</sup>.

#### **During the evaluation period, the European Solidarity Corps had to respond to several external crises that notably affected the programme's implementation.**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected participants' engagement with the programme, but the majority of individual participants (78%, 1 969, N=2 536) confirmed that the programme provided sufficient support to them to handle the crisis<sup>115</sup>. 67% (1 695, N=2 530) of individual participants noted that some planned activities were moved online, while 28% (720) experienced a change in the thematic focus of their project. 21% (519) of respondents reported changes in the project's target communities and social groups. The pandemic caused 18% (467) to postpone their participation, and 7% (175) had to end their activity prematurely without the possibility of completing it remotely. Meanwhile, 5% (127) left their activity early but completed it remotely. This adaptability is chiefly due to the programme's ability to quickly adjust and respond to unforeseen events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme's swift response to the immediate needs of beneficiaries during these emergencies highlights its considerable potential to adapt operations to changing situations.

**Social media channels proved to be very important for the efficient communication of information during unforeseen events** (see box below and more in Annex 8).

#### **Box 10. The role of social media during unforeseen events**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media served as a critical tool for providing real-time updates on placements and answering questions. Similarly, it served as a conduit

<sup>111</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

<sup>112</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 27 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about project cooperation and support?'

<sup>113</sup> Interview programme

<sup>114</sup> Interview programme

<sup>115</sup> Survey of individual participants. Questions 86 and 87

for sharing information on the impact of Brexit on the programme, helping to address the key concerns of participants.

For the future implementation of the programme, the European Solidarity Corps should continue to use social media to communicate updates, host Questions and Answers sessions and similar efforts to address unforeseen impacts on the programme. The programme could further engage with participants and organisations on social media when communicating unforeseen events, for example, by participating in discussions in the comments of popular posts, answering questions or directing organisations and participants to relevant contacts and platforms.

#### **2.4.5. PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND MONITORING (RACER CRITERIA)**

To evaluate the efficiency of performance measurement and monitoring, the study looks at three main topics. First, the study uses the **RACER (relevant, accepted, credible, easy to monitor, robust) criteria**, which is a set of standards to ensure that the programme has been measuring the right things in the right way in the Better Regulation Toolbox of the European Commission<sup>116</sup>. Second, the efficiency of tools and methods for tracking progress is ensured by checking that they are providing accurate and timely information. Lastly, the study checks whether the European Solidarity Corps has been measuring aligns with what was initially set out to measure in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. This way, it can be ensured that the European Solidarity Corps is on the right track and making the most efficient use of resources.

Performance measurement and monitoring of the programme, based on the **RACER criteria**, indicate relevance, acceptability, credibility, ease of monitoring and robustness. The indicators outlined in the legal framework align with the purposes of the Monitoring Evaluation Framework for the European Solidarity Corps, demonstrating relevance. However, there are areas for improvement, particularly regarding the user-friendliness and functionalities of IT tools, which serve as the basis of its monitoring framework.

##### ***Relevance and Acceptability***

Regarding relevance, the **indicators used by the Commission for monitoring are deemed relevant but not necessarily comprehensive**. Indicators used for monitoring are more **compliance-focused rather than oriented towards measuring impact**. While compliance indicators are essential for ensuring adherence to regulations and guidelines, they may not fully capture the programme's broader impact in achieving its objectives. Thus, there is a need to balance compliance and impact-focused indicators to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the programme's performance and outcome. However, those **indicators that the Commission utilises for monitoring are generally acceptable**.

##### ***Credibility***

**In terms of credibility, the performance management of the European Solidarity Corps has an inherent constraint due to self-reporting and the lack of clearly operationalised definitions across the board for participants with fewer opportunities**. Without a universally operationalised definition of 'participants with fewer opportunities', it has been challenging to identify and measure the impact of the programme on this group in a credible manner. While it is recognised that this is a sensitive and complex issue, the lack of a clear indicators remains a challenge. This ambiguity potentially undermines the accurate measurement of the programme's impact on this

<sup>116</sup> European Commission, 'Better regulation' toolbox – July 2023 edition, p. 364

target group. Different organisations or individuals have been interpreting this term differently, leading to inconsistencies in data collection and analysis. The self-reporting of participants has the potential to introduce bias as participants might overstate or understate their contributions or experiences based on their perceptions or personal interests. This can affect the accuracy of the data collected and, subsequently, the programme's performance evaluation. Without clear definitions of inclusion, verifying the appropriate allocation of resources to inclusion targets can be difficult. The above factors have led to credibility issues as these performance outcomes might not accurately reflect the actual impact of the programme. To address credibility issues, it is important to establish clear definitions of what constitutes a person with fewer opportunities. **However, the European Solidarity Corps did strongly improve the credibility issues regarding its monitoring tools** that affected it during its earlier programming period, except for data accuracy at the finalisation stage. This becomes especially evident when looking at the increased number of tracked indicators and the improved granularity of data that are available for monitoring.

### ***Ease of monitoring***

**The indicators utilised by the Commission for performance management are easy to monitor** as they are tied to directly measurable outputs. This makes it easier to track progress and assess the effectiveness of various initiatives. However, an exception to this is the monitoring of people with fewer opportunities. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by this group, the standard indicators may not capture the full scope of their experiences or the impact of the interventions. This highlights the need for more nuanced and comprehensive indicators that can better reflect the realities of people with fewer opportunities.

### ***Robustness***

**Last, while the robustness of the European Solidarity Corps' performance management improved greatly over its previous iterations, there is still some room for improvement.** Due to problems with the reporting tools, many final reports were not submitted in 2021 and 2022, resulting in their absence as data points in the monitoring tools at the final stage. This omission has a negative impact on the accuracy of performance assessments, and while it affects the monitoring dashboards, the root cause lies in the incomplete performance of the reporting tools. Misreported or missing data at the finalisation stage has a negative impact on the accuracy of performance assessments. Reliable data is crucial for understanding and identifying areas for improvement at the finalisation stage. In addition, the overall lack of regular monitoring of outcome and impact-related indicators cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the European Solidarity Corps' performance. Outcome and impact indicators are essential to understanding the long-term effects and the real impact of the programme's activities for European Solidarity on the participants and organisations. In addition, the monitoring of actions under direct management is not yet fully integrated with the rest of the European Solidarity Corps monitoring data because they are implemented with different IT tools, which leads to fragmented and inconsistent data. Last, the wealth of data available to the European Solidarity Corps has led to a dispersion of indicators across several different dashboards rather than a comprehensive overview. This somewhat decreases the ease of monitoring as certain indicators cannot be compared across dashboards, and identifying indicators and dashboards can take significant time.

**Overall, it is recommended that the European Solidarity Corps implements a number of measures to address the user-friendliness of its reporting tools and simplify its monitoring framework to improve its performance management.** Concretely, the European Solidarity Corps should implement user-testing and consider

alternative ways to report during maintenance periods. In addition, the European Solidarity Corps should improve the user-friendliness of its monitoring system and further integrate data from directly managed actions. This would allow for a more holistic and consistent assessment of the programme's budgets and performance.

## 2.5. EU ADDED VALUE

### Box 11. Summary conclusions

- The European Solidarity Corps plays an important role in **cultivating a European identity** and **support for European values**.
- The programme is a powerful initiative for **youth empowerment** with a unique blend of engagement opportunities.
- While primarily engaging participants from middle-class backgrounds, the programme **includes young people** experiencing a wide range and combination of challenges.
- Participating in the European Solidarity Corps significantly **bolsters the capabilities of participant organisations** by enriching professional skills and improving organisational effectiveness.
- The **emphasis on quality** within the programme distinguishes it from other programmes that may not prioritise the same level of quality, consistency, and standards.
- The European Solidarity Corps **uniquely enables pan-European networks**, leading to long-term partnerships and relationships.

### 2.5.1. SCOPE AND VOLUME

**The European Solidarity Corps plays an important role in cultivating a European identity among young people across the Union.** The programme provides young Europeans with opportunities for cross-border solidarity engagements due to its wide international scope. This enables them to participate in collective action and develop a shared identity that extends beyond national borders. 71% (5 959, N=8 404)<sup>117</sup> of volunteers surveyed reported feeling a stronger sense of European identity after participating in the programme, highlighting its impact in developing shared European values, such as democracy, freedom, equality, human dignity, and human rights. **Participants also became more tolerant** towards the values and behaviour of others (84%, 7 055, N=8 448) and capable of cooperating with people from different backgrounds (89%, 7 485, N=8 434)<sup>118</sup>. These findings are also supported by the results of the counterfactual analysis (see Annex 7), which show a positive effect on the socio-political values of participants. Compared to applicants, they are more likely to hold tolerant views and are less likely to hold gender biases. These results indicate a clear value effect of the European Solidarity Corps on participants and contribute to strengthening solidarity and inclusivity among young people.

<sup>117</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 65 'Through participation in the ESC I improved my ability to...'

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

**Counterfactual analysis (social tolerance and prejudice):**

Compared to applicants, programme participants, on average, are more likely to report that 1) all people can be trusted (11%,  $p < 0.001$ ), (2) they would not mind their children attending school classes that discuss different gender identities and roles (7%,  $p < 0.1$ ) and (3) governments should prioritise environmental policies even if it means slower economic growth in the short run (5%,  $p < 0.1$ ).

They are also less likely to express homophobic ( $-20%$ ,  $p = < 0.1$ ) views.

**Participation in the programme has also enhanced the European identity and profile of the participating organisations.** Initially concentrated on local missions, these organisations have reported, through their involvement in the programme, a better understanding and appreciation of their connection to the wider pan-European context. They are expanding their focus beyond local issues and gaining awareness of how their efforts contribute to the broader European landscape, shared challenges, and the advantages of collective action<sup>119</sup>. **Additionally, the positive attitude towards the EU clearly spills over to the engaged communities and societal groups,** as reported by the participating organisations in the survey programme. 81% (717,  $N = 884$ ) of the surveyed participating organisations either agree or strongly agree that the work of European Solidarity Corps volunteers contributed to positive attitudes towards the EU in engaged communities and societal groups<sup>120</sup>.

***Strengthening democracy and active citizenship***

**The European Solidarity Corps plays a critical role in addressing and mitigating the rising challenges of anti-EU and anti-democratic sentiments.** These issues have garnered a lot of attention from various stakeholders interviewed, who also indicated the programme as being crucial in promoting active citizenship and safeguarding support for democracy. The programme is well positioned to foster this through its strong international network that cascades from National Authorities to societal organisations, down to the community and individual levels.

**The link between volunteering activities within the programme and broader societal, political, and citizenship engagement has been extensively recognised.** National stakeholders and participating organisations have noted that the European Solidarity Corps serves as a gateway or reinforcement for broader societal participation. Young individuals who engage in solidarity activities develop a keen interest in the social and political spheres, a natural progression from community service to active citizenship. Evidence of the programme's success in this regard is seen in survey data: 65% of participants (5 478,  $N = 8 435$ )<sup>121</sup> reported an increased motivation to engage more actively in their community's social and political life. This indicates a significant positive impact of the European Solidarity Corps on fostering active citizenship.

***Empowering youth***

**The European Solidarity Corps distinguishes itself as a powerful initiative for youth empowerment, presenting a unique blend of opportunities.** The programme helps guide young individuals to become proactive contributors within a dynamic and uncertain global landscape. Simultaneously, it supports their personal and professional growth, enabling them to develop crucial life and work skills beyond what formal education

<sup>119</sup> Interview programme

<sup>120</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 31 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on engaged communities and societal groups?'

<sup>121</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 65 'Through participation in the ESC I improved my ability to...'

has to offer. In the words of one survey respondent from a participating organisation in Italy:

**'The European Solidarity Corps programme is the only one that really ensures young people's smooth transition from teenage to adulthood, and makes them feel like active participants. Moreover, the solidarity actions are concrete and have a real impact.'** – survey response from a participating organisation

The results of the survey programme support this finding, indicating agreement among participants that the European Solidarity Corps programme effectively addresses societal challenges (80%, 6 650, N=8 311) and benefits the personal and professional development of young people involved (93%, 7 696, N=8 309)<sup>122</sup>.

Our interview programme further revealed that climate change, global conflicts, economic uncertainty, and spiralling mental health issues intersect, putting pressure on young people who are often in vulnerable situations themselves (e.g. unable to find gainful employment in line with their qualifications). In this context, the **programme allows young people to engage with topics that interest them and make a difference in important global issues, leading to deeper learning and meaningful personal development**. This helps tackle the various challenges young people face, empowering them to contribute positively to society. With its variety of thematic options, solidarity activities, and unique funding schemes that cover each volunteer's expenses and encourage cross-border involvement, the programme offers opportunities rarely available at a national level.

A substantial share, 34% (2 368, N=6 899)<sup>123</sup>, stated that the European Solidarity Corps represented their sole opportunity to engage in volunteer activities. This underscores **the importance of the programme in fostering volunteerism among individuals who may lack alternative avenues or are perhaps motivated by the specific missions or structure of the European Solidarity Corps**. Additionally, 23% (1 604) expressed uncertainty about their likelihood of participating in volunteering activities independently of the European Solidarity Corps. This ambivalence could stem from **a lack of awareness of other volunteering opportunities**, lower intrinsic motivation, or uncertainty about their ability or willingness to volunteer independently. Taken together, these results underline the added value of the European Solidarity Corps in encouraging and facilitating volunteering through a blend of opportunities that might otherwise not exist.

### ***Facilitating the transition from the education system to the labour market***

**The European Solidarity Corps is serving as a bridging and acceleration platform for youth facing significant employment hurdles despite educational achievements.** Based on the socio-demographic profile of the programme's participants as well as the targeted survey results, the programme is particularly appealing to those at the outset of their careers who are eager to bridge the gap between academic study and professional practice. By participating in the programme, they seek not just to contribute to societal challenges but also to enhance their own skills, gain valuable experience, and clarify their professional aspirations. In essence, although this is not one of the direct goals of the programme, in effect, the European Solidarity Corps is positioned as an important intervention in addressing the disconnect between education and employment among Europe's youth, providing them with the tools and opportunities to advance their personal and professional development in a challenging job market.

<sup>122</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 103 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements: The European Solidarity Corps programme...'

<sup>123</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 106 'Would you have...'

Notably, a substantial portion of the participants of the programme, 40% (3 164, N=7 937), reported job-related challenges, specifically difficulties in securing employment at the time of their application to the programme<sup>124</sup>. This significant figure underscores the harsh employment realities facing a large segment of today's youth, **indicating that these challenges are a primary motivator for seeking out opportunities through the European Solidarity Corps.**

The survey also shed light on the educational background of the applicants. A combined total of 7 975 (N=10 468) participants, making up 76% of those surveyed, have already attained higher education at the time of their application. This data reveals that **the majority of participants already possessed a strong academic foundation at the time of their application.**

In terms of professional experience, the findings also reveal that the majority of the participants, 63% (6 610, N=10 460), either had no professional experience or less than one full year of it. This statistic is particularly telling, highlighting that **a significant portion of the European Solidarity Corps participants are at the very beginning of their professional journeys at the time of application**, seeking opportunities to gain initial experience and enter the job market. Additionally, 41% (4 288, N=10 342) cited the desire to gain professional experience or explore potential career paths as their top motivation. This reflects a strong inclination among the youth to leverage **the programme as a platform for professional development and to navigate the complexities of career planning.** Taken together, **a significant portion of the individuals were seeking opportunities through the European Solidarity Corps to enhance their employability.**

As described under section 2.1.4, the evaluation did not assess participants' long-term employment outcomes. However, the above findings, together with the reported positive impact on participants' personal, professional and educational skills (see section 2.3.2), **suggest that participants, in particular those facing challenges in employment, perceive the programme as an opportunity to improve employment-related competences and thus as a potential bridge between education and the labour market.** Additionally, the opportunities for soft skill development that participation in Solidarity Corps presents, which is one of the motivational factors for PWFOs participation (see section on relevance), highlights its potential as a valuable tool in supporting vulnerable youth.

### ***Inclusion of people with fewer opportunities***

**The European Solidarity Corps stands out by enabling the involvement of individuals with fewer opportunities at a level unmatched by existing programmes or national efforts alone.** It achieves this by providing funding to volunteers and subsidising essential services, thus reducing typical barriers. In addition, the European Solidarity Corps is perceived as offering a unique blend of cross-border inclusive opportunities that are currently unmatched by any other cross-border volunteering programme available. As described by one of the respondents in the interview programme from an international network organisation:

**'I think it's the leading program in cross-border mobility and it's the only programme where you can ask for real funds for an inclusive project. For instance, if you need a personal assistant while travelling the programme covers these costs. If you need a sign language translation, the programme is covering**

<sup>124</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 14 'In your view, at the time you applied to the European Solidarity Corps, did you face any of these challenges? Check all that apply.'

**these costs, so you can really make it inclusive. [Without the European Solidarity Corps] this wouldn't be there. I don't know any other programme that does that.'** – interview programme with international organisations

**While primarily engaging participants from middle-class backgrounds, the programme includes young people experiencing a wide range of challenges, such as unemployment, mental and physical health issues, and discrimination, showcasing its broad reach and inclusive approach.** Regarding the economic profile of participants, survey results on income levels and household status upon applying to the European Solidarity Corps reveal that the majority of respondents identify as belonging to the average or middle-income group within their respective countries at the time of their application. Specifically, 69% of participants (7 163, N=10 421)<sup>125</sup> reported falling into income categories slightly below average, average, or slightly above average<sup>126</sup>. A smaller proportion of participants, specifically 24% (2 491), identified their households as belonging to the lower-middle to lowest-income categories. Within this group, 6% (673) indicated they were in the lowest income bracket. Correspondingly, 6% of participants (453) reported that they were unable to afford food or necessities at the time of their application.

These findings indicate that the programme appeals to individuals from a wide variety of economic backgrounds while predominantly attracting those from the mid-range of the income spectrum. While the programme's financial support is perceived as generous compared to other programmes and remains crucial in reducing economic barriers to participation, obstacles still persist, particularly for those from lower-income households. Survey respondents from lower-income households were somewhat less likely to agree that their financial costs for participating in the programme were sufficiently covered (69% agreed, on average) compared to those from higher-income households (78% agreed). Additionally, specific issues affecting social benefits for volunteers, such as the potential loss of social welfare benefits and the lack of unified administrative and legal frameworks for volunteering, are more likely to hinder the participation of youth from lower-income backgrounds<sup>127</sup>. These factors may contribute to the lower representation of low-income individuals in the programme despite the financial support provided.

Despite a significant number of participants coming from middle-class income backgrounds, the programme also successfully attracts and supports a considerable number of young people who are vulnerable. Many participants reported facing different challenges at the time of their application that were not directly related to their household income. **The most frequently reported challenge was their inability to find a job despite trying (40%, 3 164, N=7 937) (see sub-section above), followed by experiencing mental health problems (26%, 2 078)<sup>128</sup>.** 17% (1 360) of participants reported living in a remote geographical area, far away from major urban centres, while 11% (841) reported facing discrimination because of their identity, beliefs, or ethnic background. 8% (648) reported having a physical health problem.

It is important to note that the programme is able to cater to the diverse needs and motivations of its participants. The evaluation results show that, among survey respondents, PWFOs have somewhat different motivations for participating in the European Solidarity Corps compared to the general participant group. Notably, 48% (782) of PWFOs cited the development of soft skills – such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability

<sup>125</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 12 'Please specify the appropriate number counting all wages, salaries and other incomes received.'

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> European Commission (2020). Study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities. Final report. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture.

<sup>128</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 14 'In your view, at the time you applied to the European Solidarity Corps, did you face any of these challenges? Check all that apply.'

– as a motivation, compared to 42% (3 693) of other participants<sup>129</sup>. Additionally, only 32% (523) of PWFOs indicated the desire to volunteer abroad as a motivation, slightly lower than the 39% (3 426) observed among the general participant group. This aligns with interview findings, which highlight that PWFOs often prioritise in-country opportunities due to lower perceived barriers to participation.

These results offer insight into the unique motivational factors of the PWFO group that are only available through adequate identification of their circumstances, needs, and preferences. Understanding these factors is crucial for the programme's success. Additionally, this insight points to a learning direction on which aspects could be further highlighted to attract PWFOs and determine what they find helpful. This lesson is valuable not only for the European Solidarity Corps but also for any EU policy instruments aimed at supporting vulnerable youth. Emphasising soft skill development and ensuring low barriers to participation are critical to making the programmes more accessible to PWFOs and enhancing their overall effectiveness in supporting vulnerable youth.

## 2.5.2. PROCESS AND INNOVATION

### *Capacity building of organisations*

**The European Solidarity Corps programme distinguishes itself by transcending national boundaries, fostering broader collaboration and skill enhancement, and providing access to diverse funding opportunities.** Unlike national programmes, the programme offers a holistic approach that is challenging to replicate on a smaller scale. This European-wide framework ensures that participant organisations are not confined to local or national contexts but are integrated into a larger, more diverse network that supports their capacity building and development.

**Participating in the European Solidarity Corps significantly bolsters the capabilities of participant organisations by enriching professional skills and improving organisational effectiveness.** A key component of this enhancement is the development of administrative and project management capabilities, which are vital for effectively handling both public and private grant applications and for identifying new funding opportunities. 76% (736, N=970) of surveyed organisations either agree or strongly agree that the programme enhanced their project management skills (see more in section 2.3 **Error! Reference source not found.** on effectiveness)<sup>130</sup>. National programmes, in comparison, are likely to offer more limited resources and scope, especially in terms of exposure and skills needed to make better use of European funding landscapes.

**Another standout benefit reported by participants is the notable improvement in English proficiency,** which is crucial for engaging with European funders and for successful cross-border collaboration (see section 2.3 **Error! Reference source not found.** on effectiveness). This linguistic advancement, often a direct result of engagement with the continent-wide initiative, goes beyond what might be achievable through national programmes. National initiatives, while beneficial, typically do not provide the same level of linguistic exposure or the opportunity to engage with a wide range of European languages and cultures.

**The European Solidarity Corps provides a clear, standardised structure for volunteering activities, which is designed to ensure a consistent quality of experience for participants across various countries.** This standardisation

<sup>129</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 29 'What were the three most important reasons why you applied to become a volunteer with the European Solidarity Corps? Check your top three reasons.'

<sup>130</sup> Survey of organisations, Question 30 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?'

encompasses support services, comprehensive training, and clear guidelines, elements that might not be uniformly accessible through national programmes. The consistency and quality assurance offered by the programme contributes to a more effective and enriching experience for both organisations and individual participants, illustrated by high satisfaction rates (see section 2.3 on effectiveness).

While it is true that **the financial resources directly provided by the European Solidarity Corps may not always be substantial for organisations, the programme compensates by offering a wealth of other resources**. These include comprehensive training, logistical support, and administrative guidance, all of which can bolster organisations' operational capacities. Such empowerment often leads to spillover effects, enabling organisations to attract additional funding or forge new partnerships<sup>131</sup>.

Furthermore, the **European Solidarity Corps plays a crucial role in making volunteering more accessible by covering the participation costs of individual volunteers**. While there is room to further reduce obstacles to participation (see section 2.5.1), this support is particularly beneficial for individuals who might otherwise lack the financial means or opportunity to engage in volunteering, especially in a cross-border context. By reducing these barriers, the programme facilitates a broader and more inclusive participation in volunteering activities, aligning with its core objectives of fostering solidarity and cooperation across Europe.

Finally, national implementation reports indicate that the programme had varying degrees of policy-level impact across different countries<sup>132</sup>. In a few countries, the programme created a unique niche, raising the profile of young people and PWFOs as a distinct target group for policies, contributing to the development of youth policies at the local level and increasing youth activity in some municipalities. Other countries reported no evident effect at the national policy level, indicating that the programme's influence is more pronounced at the local or organisational level rather than at the national policy level.

### ***High quality of the programme***

The emphasis on quality within the European Solidarity Corps contributes to significant EU-added value, distinguishing it from many national schemes that may not prioritise the same level of quality, consistency, and international standards. This commitment to quality ensures that participants have enriching and impactful experiences while also enhancing the credibility and capacity of the organisations involved. **The programme stands out through its implementation of stringent standards and processes designed to ensure high-quality volunteering experiences**. This focus extends beyond what many national schemes might offer, as it sets a pan-European standard that aligns with broader objectives and values.

The rigorous administrative process required to obtain the **European Solidarity Corps Quality Label acts as a mechanism to ensure that only well-prepared and capable organisations can lead projects** (also see section 2.3 on effectiveness). This selectivity helps safeguard the quality of volunteer experiences, aligning with the programme's overall goal of fostering solidarity and skills development among European youth. By setting these high standards, the European Solidarity Corps ensures a consistent, impactful volunteer experience across Europe, something that individual national programmes might not uniformly achieve due to varying standards and resources.

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<sup>131</sup> Interview programme

<sup>132</sup> See annex 1: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

**The European Solidarity Corps Quality Label enhances the quality and safety of activities and volunteer well-being while also encouraging organisations to regularly evaluate and enhance their operations.** This is supported by survey results, which indicate that a significant portion of participating organisations believe the Quality Label supports the provision of high-quality activities and the safety and well-being of volunteers (71%, 694, N=974)<sup>133</sup>. 68% (666) either agree or strongly agree that the Quality Label supports volunteer safety and well-being. Additionally, a substantial number agree or strongly agree (66%, 639) that the certification process helps encourage organisations to continually assess and improve their operations.

These findings are corroborated by the results of the interview programme, which additionally indicate that **attaining the Quality Label enhances the reputation and perception of these organisations, thereby strengthening their positions and improving their credibility**<sup>134</sup>. Being recognised as a European Solidarity Corps-qualified organisation not only improves operational capacity, as organisations gain skills through the process of acquiring the label, but also elevates an organisation's standing within the community and among potential volunteers, as reported in the interview programme. This increase in prestige can make these organisations more attractive to both volunteers and other stakeholders, such as funders or partners.

### 2.5.3. NETWORK EFFECTS

**The European Solidarity Corps programme uniquely facilitates intercultural dialogue through its cross-border nature, significantly enriching the participants' experience.** This exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives is a distinctive advantage, fostering increased understanding and tolerance among European youth. In contrast, national programmes often provide experiences that are more limited to domestic cultural contexts. The transnational character of the programme also promotes international collaboration and a sense of European identity among young participants, which exceeds the typical scope of in-country programmes.

One of the key **EU-added values of the programme is that it enables pan-European networks, leading to long-term partnerships and relationships.** As per our survey results, the majority of organisations (64%, 626, N=972) either agree or strongly agree that the programme helped build new partnerships that continued post-project<sup>135</sup>. Additionally, 62% (601) of organisations surveyed either agree or strongly agree that their international network expanded due to programme participation.

These networks are invaluable for participating organisations, offering support and opportunities. According to our survey results, 60% (557) out of 960 responding organisations agreed or strongly agreed that the programme enabled the sharing of best practices and success stories between organisations<sup>136</sup>. This enhanced international networking and cooperation environment would be difficult to achieve relying on national volunteering schemes alone. Additionally, survey results reflect the **programme's success in fostering lasting relationships among participants.** A significant 81% (6 778, N=8 373) of respondents remain in contact with volunteers they met during the programme, highlighting the enduring impact of these connections<sup>137</sup>. **These statistics demonstrate the European Solidarity Corps' role in not only enhancing individual**

<sup>133</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 25 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label?'

<sup>134</sup> Interview programme

<sup>135</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 30 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?'

<sup>136</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 32 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the dissemination and exploitation of the results of the European Solidarity Corps programme?'

<sup>137</sup> Survey of individual participants. Question 78 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'

**and organisational capabilities but also in cultivating a collaborative and resourceful European community.**

**Networking effects were also highlighted by participating countries**, with many participating countries describing the programme as highly effective in promoting cooperation between them<sup>138</sup>. Several countries emphasised the programme’s role in fostering cooperation at individual and institutional levels, with a particular appreciation for its international dimension, including the participation of non-associated neighbouring countries. In this context, many countries reported an evident increase in cooperation through cross-border projects, cultural exchanges, and shared best practices via workshops and online platforms.

## 3. FINAL EVALUATION FOR THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS 2018-2020

### 3.1. RELEVANCE

#### Box 12. Summary conclusions

- The objectives and priorities of the European Solidarity Corps were especially relevant for **promoting social cohesion** and **individual development** among young people.
- The programme was **highly relevant in addressing local societal needs** due to its diverse range of formats and topics, enabling tailored projects.

#### 3.1.1. PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

The overall objective of the European Solidarity Corps in 2018-2020 was to promote solidarity, increase the engagement of young people and organisations in quality solidarity activities, strengthen cohesion and solidarity, democracy, and citizenship in Europe, and respond to societal challenges. For 2019, the programme added an additional objective: to enable more than 100 000 young people to engage in solidarity activities. Additional horizontal priorities have been introduced through the action ‘Volunteering teams in priority areas’ (see below); in particular, the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities has been introduced as a priority for 2019.

**Table 6. European Solidarity Corps priorities 2018-2020**

2018	2019	2020
European cultural heritage	European cultural heritage	<i>(discontinued)</i>
Integration of third-country nationals (including asylum seekers and refugees)	<i>(discontinued)</i>	<i>(discontinued)</i>
Response to environmental and climate challenges, including disaster prevention, preparedness, and	Response to environmental and climate challenges, including disaster prevention, preparedness, and	Response to environmental and climate challenges (excluding immediate disaster response)

<sup>138</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

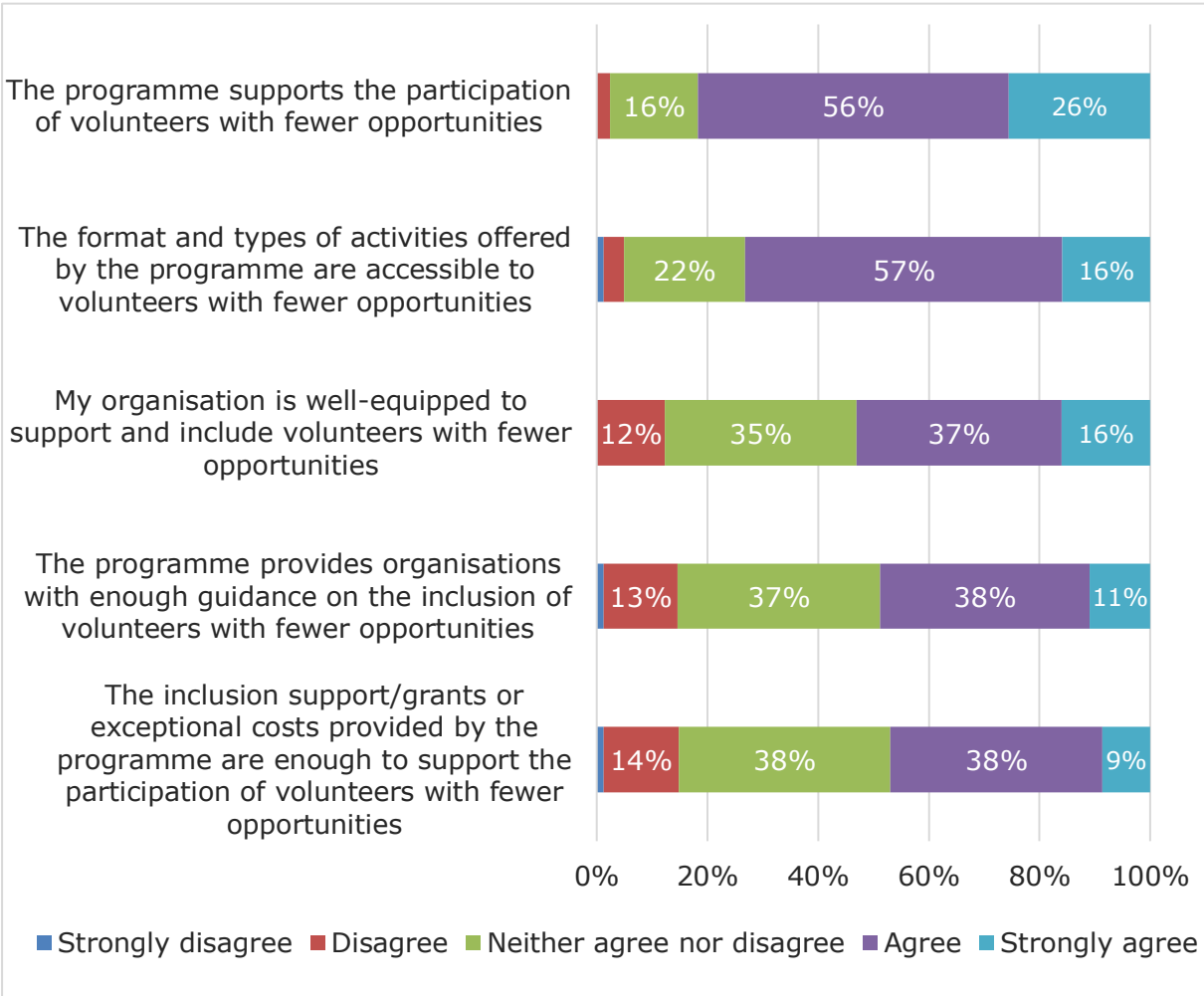
2018	2019	2020
recovery (excluding immediate disaster response)	recovery (excluding immediate disaster response)	
	<i>(added)</i> Social inclusion of people with fewer opportunities	<i>(changed)</i> Projects building inclusive societies, including through bridging the intergenerational and social divide or addressing challenges linked to geographical remoteness
		<i>(added)</i> Projects aimed at improving mental health and well-being

Source: Annual Work Programmes, European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020.

The survey results showed that organisations believe that the programme’s work directly benefited the communities and societal groups involved (80%, 56) and promoted openness to new cultures and within the communities involved (76%, 53). This indicates that organisations believed that their actions were responsive to the needs of the communities involved and were able to promote solidarity.

During the 2018-2020 programming period, the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities was introduced as a new priority. Most organisations felt that the programme’s structure and the types of activities offered were generally appropriate for supporting the participation of these individuals. However, possibly due to the novelty of the priority, many organisations were uncertain about their capacity to effectively support volunteers with fewer opportunities. They were also unsure if the support and grants available for inclusion were sufficient. Furthermore, there was a consensus that additional guidance was needed on this topic. This issue is discussed in more detail in the sections concerning the second programming period.

**Figure 18. Organisations’ perception of the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of organisations. Question 34 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the inclusion of volunteers with fewer opportunities in the European Solidarity Corps programme?' (N=80)

Compared to the overall objectives of the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027, discussed in the previous section, this programming period focused more on the transition of young people from school to work by also providing them with opportunities in the form of traineeships and jobs in solidarity-related fields. This strand was discontinued in 2021. During its lifetime, only 2.8%<sup>139</sup> of contracted projects in the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 were in the traineeships and jobs strand, and the allocated budget for this strand was significantly lower than for volunteering.

The emphasis put on employability in terms of budget and priorities was in some contrast with the goals and priorities of organisations at the time. The targeted survey had a low number of responses from organisations representing traineeship and job opportunities<sup>140</sup>, therefore, its results are not conclusive. Other sources, such as a SALTO research report, showed that the majority of applicant organisations saw their projects as most closely aligned with the programme objectives 'competence development of young people' and

<sup>139</sup> Calculated based on DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2014-2020; date of extraction: 5 January 2024).

<sup>140</sup> Comprising of six responses.

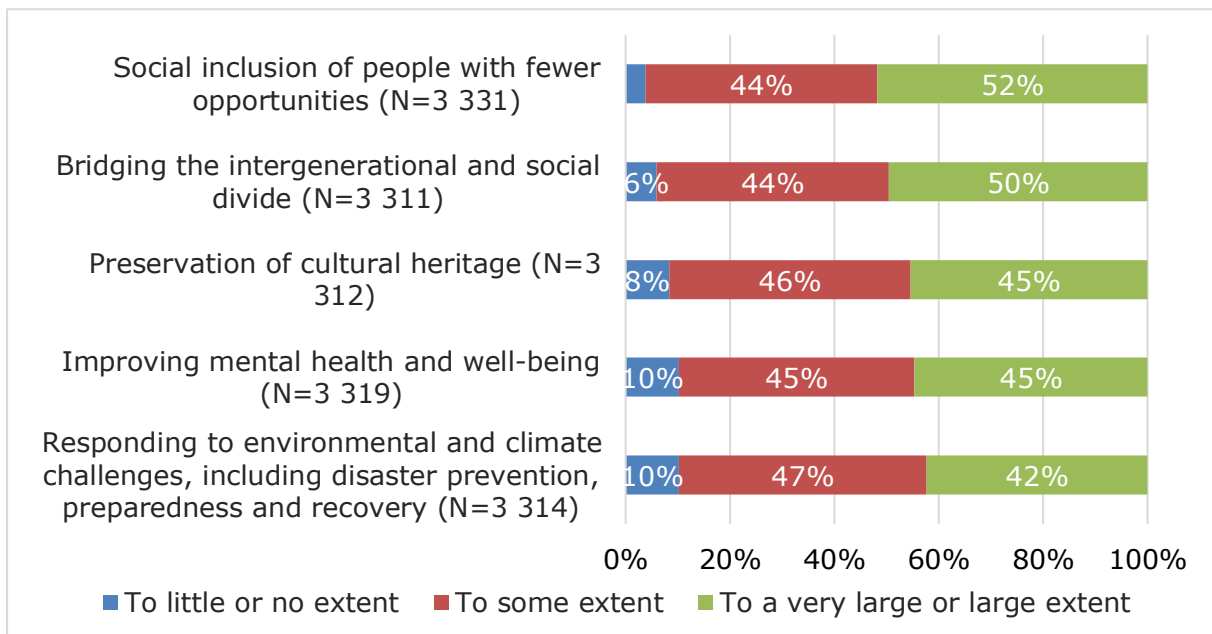
'promotion of active citizenship'<sup>141</sup>. Nonetheless, the report found that most organisations also considered their projects (of which only 2% represented traineeship and job projects) to correspond with the programme objective of 'fostering employability of young people and their transition into the labour market'.

### 3.1.2. INDIVIDUALS

Between 2018 and 2020, the European Solidarity Corps served the needs of young people and was aligned with the major societal needs of its time. Young people were satisfied with the project activities and largely believed that they met their needs.

Survey respondents noted that the European Solidarity Corps priorities were relevant and met the needs and expectations of society, especially the social inclusion of people with fewer opportunities and bridging the generational and social divide (see below).

**Figure 19. Relevance of European Solidarity Corps priorities according to individual participants, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of individuals (participants and applicants). Question 102 'The European Solidarity Corps has several priorities. In your view, to what extent do they meet the needs and expectations of society?'

As discussed in more detail in section 2.1.4, many applicants wanted to gain work or training experience by participating in the programme; data shows that their lack of work experience was part of the reason for their application and the inability to find a job was one of the most frequently cited difficulties they experienced at the time of application. While the traineeships and jobs strand was expected to respond to this need, the low uptake of the stand suggests that applicants instead primarily turned to other activities offered by the programme (i.e. volunteering) to gain employment-relevant experience.

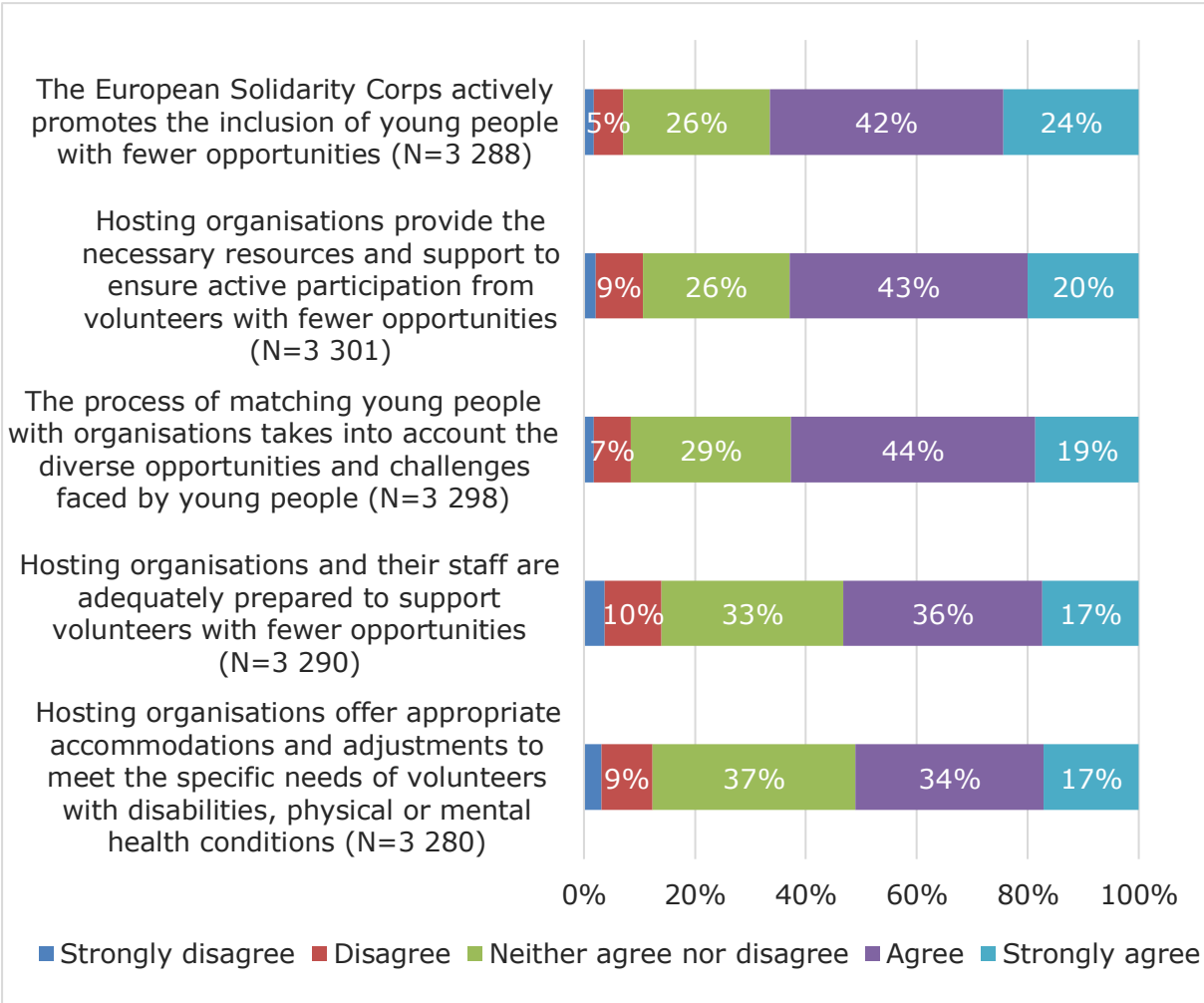
Among individuals who applied for activities during this period, 33% (1 174) did not have any work experience, and the biggest obstacle they faced in life was not being able to find a job (43%, 1 170). The major reason for application was to engage in activities for

<sup>141</sup> See Akarçesme S., Frennes H., Böhler J. and Mayerl M. (2019). Exploring the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps during its first year – Research Report. Available at <https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4073/01%20RAY%20Report%2020200608.pdf>.

solidarity and to live abroad (42%, 1 517 and 43%, 1 549 respectively), but also to develop soft skills and gain professional experience (41%, 1 490 and 42%, 1 504 respectively). Therefore, apart from volunteering activities, solidarity activities, traineeships, and jobs were also relevant to applicants of the European Solidarity Corps. However, as elaborated in section 3.2.1 on coherence, traineeships and jobs offered limited complementarity with the rest of the programme and stood out only to a few organisations as an alternative to other types of activities.

Although it was a relatively new priority, individual participants were mostly satisfied with the European Solidarity Corps’ approach to include people with fewer opportunities (see below). Importantly, they believed that the programme promoted their inclusion and the process of matching applicants with opportunities considered diverse needs and challenges. This aspect of the programme in the 2021-2027 programming period is analysed in further detail under section 2.1.4.

**Figure 20. Individual participants’ perception of the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 104 'How much do you agree or disagree with the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities in the European Solidarity Corps at different stages of activities?'

## 3.2. COHERENCE

### Box 13. Summary conclusions

- The programme **complemented EU-level policies** and served as a **single-entry point** for solidarity activities.
- The European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 was overall **complementary to a number of other relevant EU programmes**, in particular the Erasmus+ programme. A notable overlap between the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and other programmes was with the occupational strand, while **actual synergies were observed to a limited extent**.
- For many organisations, **the occupational strand did not stand out** as an alternative to other activities and, therefore, offered limited complementarity with the rest of the programme.
- Key elements that distinguished the European Solidarity Corps from other existing programmes were the **inclusion of in-country activities and group projects**, which reduced barriers to volunteering activities.

#### 3.2.1. INTERNAL COHERENCE

**While both directly and indirectly managed actions were perceived as coherent and distinguishable overall, certain challenges could be identified for the 2018-2020 period.** With regard to obtaining quality labels, organisations had to follow different application procedures depending on the type of organisation and the country in which it was established. Europe-wide networks and national authorities applied directly to the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, while other organisations applied to their National Agency or the relevant SALTO. In addition, the quality labels had different requirements depending on the type of solidarity activity and the role of the organisation. This process has been streamlined and simplified for the period 2021-2027.

#### *Traineeships and jobs (occupational strand)*

**In terms of the types of activities offered, the occupational strand of the European Solidarity Corps posed a challenge in terms of alignment with the rest of the programme by mixing its objectives with youth employment policies.** By not only offering volunteering but also solidarity traineeships and jobs, the programme aimed to serve as a single-entry point for solidarity activities in Europe and to complement other national and EU programmes by promoting social inclusion and offering opportunities to young people who had not previously benefited from such support.

However, some EU-level stakeholders, such as the European Economic and Social Committee<sup>142</sup>, argued that vocational activities should have been offered through other existing EU programmes focused on employment and traineeships to avoid confusion and the potential for job substitution and to keep the European Solidarity Corps more focused. This concern is supported by the results of consultations with applicant organisations, which revealed that traineeship and job projects were the least aligned with the

<sup>142</sup> See also Opinion SOC/566 (2017) of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps and amending Regulations (EU) No 1288/2013, (EU) No 1293/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1305/2013, (EU) No 1306/2013 and Decision EU No 1313/2013.

programme's objectives compared to other activities<sup>143</sup>, suggesting that potential participants saw barriers to integrating solidarity and employment/traineeships.

**Organisations that had participated in traineeships and jobs under the programme were modest in their assessment of their experience.** 61% (N=54) found the conditions for participation to be favourable for organisations, and 64% (N=55) found them to be attractive to young people. Previous studies confirm that the financial incentives offered by the strand were not always sufficient for organisations, in particular, because of the requirement for organisations to contribute to the trainee's salary and the perceived heavy administrative burdens<sup>144</sup>. Organisations interviewed who had participated in the strand noted that they had to invest not only financial resources but also considerable time and effort in training and mentoring, which many, particularly smaller organisations with few or no paid staff, were unable to provide. Some had to rely on combining the strand with other financial incentives, such as national subsidies for hiring unemployed youth<sup>145</sup>.

**Of the organisations surveyed that had not participated in traineeships and jobs,** 36% (N=837) cited a lack of relevance of such activities to their organisation as a reason for not participating in the strand, while 35% did not know about traineeships and jobs<sup>146</sup>. 19% cited insufficient financial incentives offered by the programme, while 5% indicated that there were better traineeship or job programmes for young people in their country. Other reasons given by organisations included a lack of internal capacity, lack of interest, challenges in alignment with national laws and regulations or lack of eligibility (only organisations from EU Member States could participate).

**The programme's national implementation reports, where many countries assessed the discontinuation of the strand positively, provide further insights into its limited uptake:** the most frequently raised issues of the strand were perceived incoherencies of traineeships and jobs with the core values and goals of the programme, overlaps with existing measures provided under other programmes such as Erasmus+, insufficient and unattractive funding opportunities, and legal or regulatory challenges stemming from national or regional laws on employment and traineeships<sup>147</sup>.

Taken together with the limited take-up and the challenges identified for organisations in this strand, these findings suggest that **while the difference with other voluntary activities was clear<sup>148</sup>, for many organisations, it did not stand out as an alternative to other activities and, therefore, offered limited complementarity with the rest of the programme.**

### 3.2.2. EXTERNAL COHERENCE

The European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 was a key programme enabling both the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 (in particular in the areas of employment, volunteering and social inclusion) and the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. It served as a single-entry point for solidarity activities across the EU and sought to broaden the scope of the European Voluntary Service and complement the Youth Guarantee scheme by promoting work

<sup>143</sup> See Akarçeşme S., Frennes H., Böhler J. and Mayerl M. (2019). Exploring the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps during its first year – Research Report. Available at <https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4073/01%20RAY%20Report%2020200608.pdf>.

<sup>144</sup> European Commission (2020). Study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities

<sup>145</sup> Interview programme

<sup>146</sup> The higher share of respondents who indicated a lack of awareness may also have been influenced by the fact that the strand was discontinued in 2021.

<sup>147</sup> See annex: synthesis of the national implementation reports for the European Solidarity Corps programme

<sup>148</sup> Among surveyed organisations (N=55), 78% agreed or strongly agreed that the difference between volunteering and traineeships/jobs under the programme was clear.

placements as an important experience for young people to acquire skills and facilitate access to employment.

### ***Coherence with other EU programmes***

**The European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 was overall complementary to a number of other relevant EU programmes**, in particular the Erasmus+ 2014-2020 programme. Both programmes used common resources and structures, such as management by the same (or similar) National Agencies, use of the European Youth Portal and support structures such as the SALTO network. An overlap between the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and other programmes could be found with the programme's occupational strand (see table below), while actual synergies were observed to a limited extent.

Key elements that distinguished the European Solidarity Corps from other existing programmes were the inclusion of in-country activities and group projects, which reduced barriers to volunteering activities.

**Table 7. Other existing EU programmes and overlaps with the European Solidarity Corps during the 2018-2020 period**

<p><b>Erasmus+</b></p>	<p>The European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and Erasmus+ 2014-2020 were key programmes in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategies for 2010-2018 and 2019-2027. The European Solidarity Corps complemented Erasmus+ through its focus on solidarity actions and social inclusion, targeting participants outside formal institutional frameworks and those with fewer opportunities.</p> <p>There was an overlap between the programmes in the area of employment, in particular between the occupational strand of the European Solidarity Corps and the Erasmus+ graduate traineeships, both of which aimed to support young people in their transition to employment. Compared to the European Solidarity Corps, Erasmus+ had no age limit for participants, which made the latter more accessible in this respect. On the other hand, the occupational strand was complementary by offering in-country placements, which were not available under Erasmus+.</p> <p>In terms of synergies, the programme used the existing management and implementation arrangements already in place under the Erasmus+ programme, following a similar model to the European Voluntary Service. In addition, organisations with an Erasmus+ volunteering accreditation could use it to participate in the European Solidarity Corps until the end of 2021 but had to apply for a quality label to participate as a lead organisation in the 2021-2027 programming period.</p>
<p><b>Europe for Citizens</b></p>	<p>The goals and themes of the two programmes overlapped in that they identified volunteering as an essential component of active citizenship, supported opportunities for social and intercultural engagement and promoted the values of the European Union. The programmes complemented each other in achieving these objectives, with Europe for Citizens having a stronger focus on citizens rather than youth and supporting the engagement of a wider range of stakeholders, including transnational partnerships and networks between communities. In this context, there were clear synergies between the two programmes, as applicants for Europe for</p>

	<p>Citizens projects under the Democratic Engagement and Civic Participation strand were encouraged not only to raise awareness of the European Solidarity Corps and to recruit volunteers but also to work with those already registered in the programme. Specifically, young people aged 18-30 registered on the European Solidarity Corps portal could join the European Solidarity Corps within the Europe for Citizens programme.</p> <p>While both programmes targeted young people, the European Solidarity Corps did so directly, whereas Europe for Citizens relied on organisations to involve individual participants. The forms of volunteering were also different, with the European Solidarity Corps offering opportunities for full-time engagement in the context of a specific project, while Europe for Citizens sought to promote volunteering as an everyday activity.</p>
<p><b>The European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative</b></p>	<p>The European Social Fund and the European Solidarity Corps overlapped in offering subsidised jobs and traineeships for young people through employment projects. In the context of employment and youth, the European Social Fund has supported the European Employment Services (EURES) in facilitating work placements abroad, including for young people. During the 2014-2020 period, additional support for youth was provided through the Youth Employment Initiative to combat youth unemployment and inactivity, which reinforced and sustained the support provided by the European Social Fund for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. Both programmes were thus complementary to the youth employment policies supported by the European Commission. However, the evaluation did not identify concrete synergies between the programmes.</p>
<p><b>European Employment Services (EURES)</b></p>	<p>The EURES network, including its specific initiative for young people (Your First EURES Job), has focused on cross-border jobs, training, and apprenticeship placements for EU/EEA nationals, with the main focus on job placements. There were some limited synergies with the EURES Job Mobility Portal, which served as a platform for the European Solidarity Corps occupational strand. The programme's occupational strand was complementary in enabling in-country placements, which were not as visible in EURES.</p>
<p><b>Horizon 2020</b></p>	<p>The most direct link to the European Solidarity Corps could be found in Horizon 2020 Cluster 2: Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society, which focused on democratic governance and citizen participation, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, and social, economic, technological and cultural transformations. Horizon 2020 complemented activities under the European Solidarity Corps through calls focusing on social challenges faced by young people (e.g. social exclusion, poverty and employment), youth mobility, education, training and skills development. Activities were also complementary to broader youth initiatives such as Youth on the Move, the Youth Employment Package and the Youth Guarantee.</p>

### 3.3. EFFECTIVENESS

#### Box 10. Summary conclusions

- The European Solidarity Corps navigated through **regulatory and pandemic-related challenges** in 2018-2020, gradually increasing the number of participants engaged in mobility but **falling short of the targets**.
- The programme achieved **high levels of satisfaction among participants**, particularly in terms of improving personal, professional, and educational skills, as well as strengthening solidarity and social and civic awareness.
- **Organisations recognised improvements** in project planning, implementation, and reporting skills compared to the previous period and noted the **positive effects of the Quality Label** on their future fundraising and project delivery.
- The programme had an **impact on community development**, fostering a sense of community, revitalising local initiatives and promoting a broader global perspective, thus fostering a positive reception of the EU and its values within communities.

#### 3.3.1. OUTPUTS

**The late adoption of the European Solidarity Corps regulation in October 2018 and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 delayed the delivery of programme outputs in both years, yet the performance targets remained high.**

The traineeships and jobs action was the least performing in terms of achieved outputs, which ultimately led to its discontinuation in the 2021-2027 MFF (see table below). At the same time, the European Solidarity Corps demonstrated a growth of participants in 2020. It has consistently achieved a high proportion of participants with fewer opportunities, exceeding the targets, with 42% of participants categorised as having fewer opportunities in 2020.

Moreover, the programme delivered the necessary support measures. These include the European Youth Portal (European Solidarity Corps Portal), where young people interested in the programme had to register in order to access the available volunteering opportunities and connect with organisations. In 2018, 95 832 young people registered on the portal, exceeding the annual target of 25 000<sup>149</sup>. In 2019, 90 698 young people were newly registered on the Portal, exceeding the target of 60 000<sup>150</sup>.

**Table 8. European Solidarity Corps outputs in 2018-2020**

Description	2018		2019		2020	
	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised
<b>Total no. of participants</b>	17 000	4 412	34 700	16 709	40 300	22 346
<b>Volunteering Projects, participants*</b>	8 400	2 694	24 600	11 735	28 900	14 009

<sup>149</sup> DG EAC, Annual Activity Report annexes, 2018

<sup>150</sup> DG EAC, Annual Activity Report annexes, 2019

Description	2018		2019		2020	
	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised
<b>Solidarity Projects, participants*</b>	5 400	1 057	6 200	4 447	7 300	7 196
<b>Traineeships and Jobs Projects, participants*</b>	3 200	139	3 900	208	4 100	503
<b>Volunteering teams in high priority areas, participants**</b>	-	522	-	319	-	638
<b>Participants with Fewer Opportunities (%)**</b>	25%	35%	25%	42%	25%	42%

Note: 'Planned' output numbers are milestones for key performance indicators provided in the MFF Performance Results Reports [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf). 'Realised' numbers of participants are 'actual participants'.

\*Source: DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2014-2020; date of extraction: 5 January 2024).

\*\*Source: Data provided by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (data extracted in June 2024).

\*\*\*Source: Calculated based on DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2014-2020; date of extraction: 5 January 2024).

### 3.3.2. RESULTS

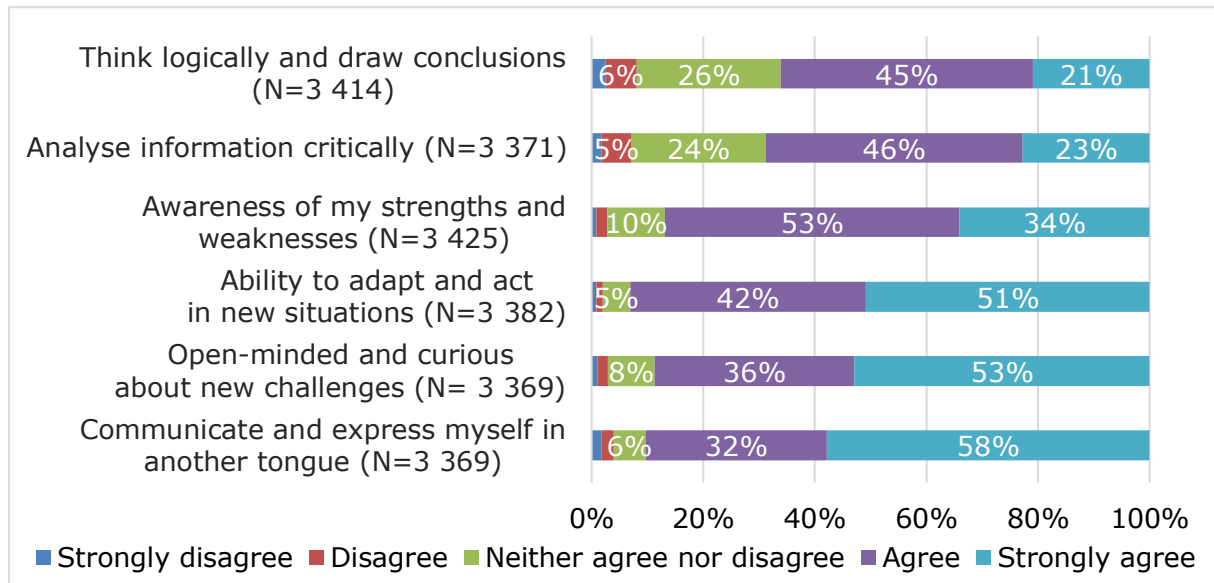
**Almost all surveyed participants were highly satisfied with the European Solidarity Corps experience in the 2018-2020 period (89%, 3 048, N=3 430).** The programme supported personal development (83%), promoted educational and professional growth (83%) and helped participants improve their solidarity, as well as social and civic awareness (75%).

#### *Results for participants*

**The European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 strengthened personal skills and enhanced their professional and educational competencies.** The programme made volunteers more confident in the labour market and more aware of their skills and competencies. The programme was also instrumental in improving the participants' sense of solidarity, as well as social and civic awareness.

**The 2018-2020 programme was highly valued for its role in improving personal skills** (see figure below). The survey programme showed that participants in the programme increased their self-awareness, adaptability, openness to new challenges and critical thinking skills. They also reported improvements in their ability to reason, analyse information and communicate and express themselves in a new language.

**Figure 21. Personal improvements after European Solidarity Corps, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 65 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Through participation in the European Solidarity Corps, I improved my ability to...', the data is subset from the participants in 2018-2020 projects.

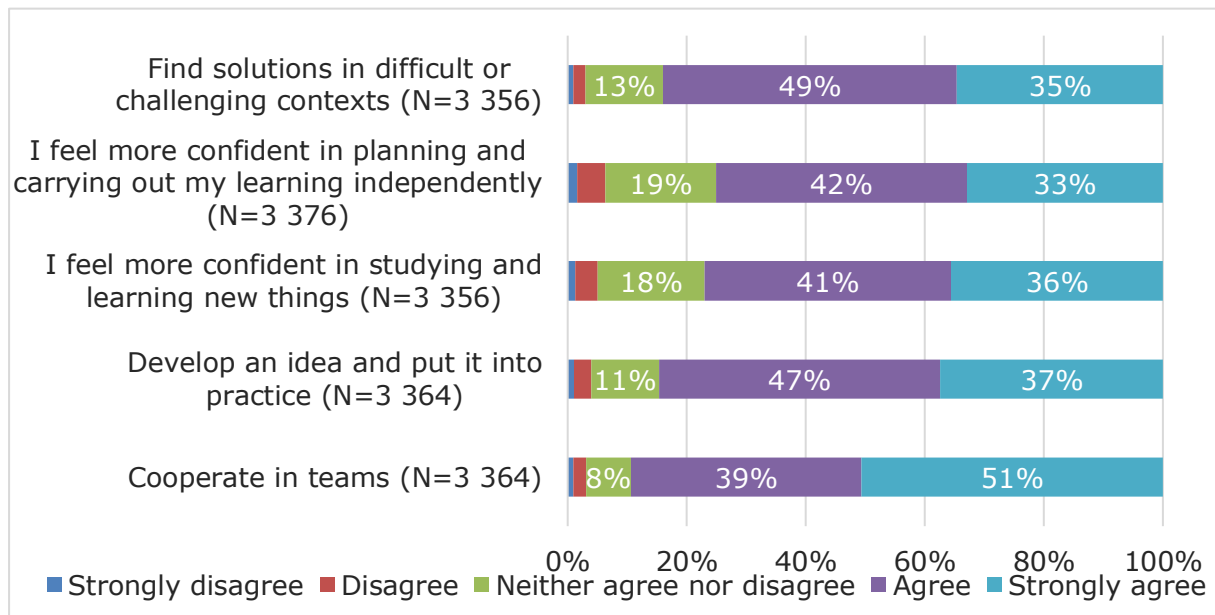
**In addition, participation improved participants' professional skills and confidence in independent learning and studying** (see figure below), especially in working effectively in teams. **Two out of five European Solidarity Corps participants studied a new language** at the B2 level after participating in the programme in the 2018-2020 period (40%, 1 449, N=3 604). The majority learned English (24%, 340), Spanish (19%, 274) and French (17%, 249).

**The majority of participants agreed that their professional skills and abilities are in demand** (66%, 2 385, N=3 603) and **that they recognised their personal strengths and areas for improvement** (85%, 3 061, N=3 603). In terms of competitiveness in the labour market, 52% (1 868, N=3 599) mentioned that they are confident, although a significant 30% (1 087) remained rather neutral.

When it comes to making decisions, 59% (2 127, N=3 605) preferred to make plans rather than quick, spontaneous decisions, indicating a tendency towards deliberate and thoughtful planning. Meeting new people seemed relatively easy to 68% (2 455, N=3 596) of the participants, indicating a generally sociable and outgoing disposition among the majority.

**The European Solidarity Corps inadvertently became a catalyst for the development of diverse skills and competences among participants, the case studies showed.** For example, some individuals reported **acquiring unexpected skills**, such as photography, which not only enhanced their personal development but also made them more marketable in the labour market.

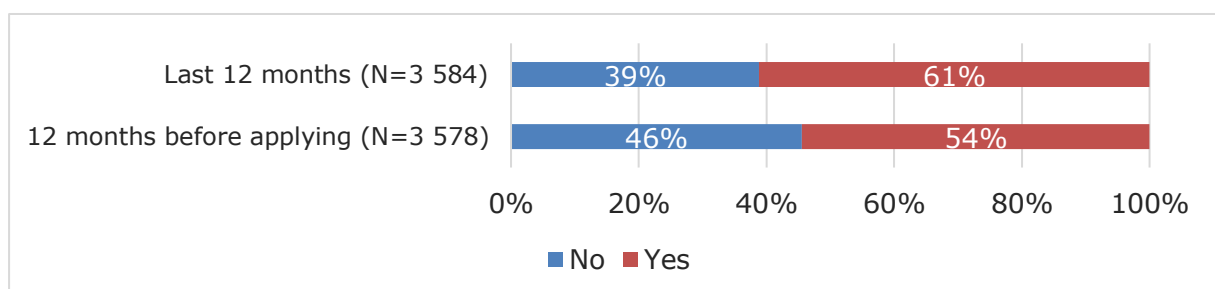
**Figure 22. Professional and educational improvements after European Solidarity Corps, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 65 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Through participation in the European Solidarity Corps, I improved my ability to...' and Question 66 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?', the data is subset from the participants in 2018-2020 projects.

European Solidarity Corps participants **became more involved in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities after taking part in the programme in the 2018-2020 period (see figure below). They demonstrated an increased sense of solidarity and social and civic awareness.** They showed an increase in tolerance towards different values and behaviours (82%, 2 757, N=3 376) and reported improved skills in interacting with people from different backgrounds and cultures (87%, 2 938, N=3 373). The programme was instrumental in deepening their understanding of fundamental social and political concepts such as democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights (70%, 2 366, N=3 377). It also boosted awareness of environmental, sustainability and climate challenges (67%, 2 268, N=3 368) and contributed to fostering a stronger European identity among them (71%, 2 375, N=3 366). Their belief in the ability to effect meaningful social change improved, with 91% (3 253, N=3 592) agreeing on that. This demonstrated widespread optimism about the potential for the volunteers' impact on social change.

**Figure 23. Engagement levels in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities before European Solidarity Corps and after, 2018-2020**



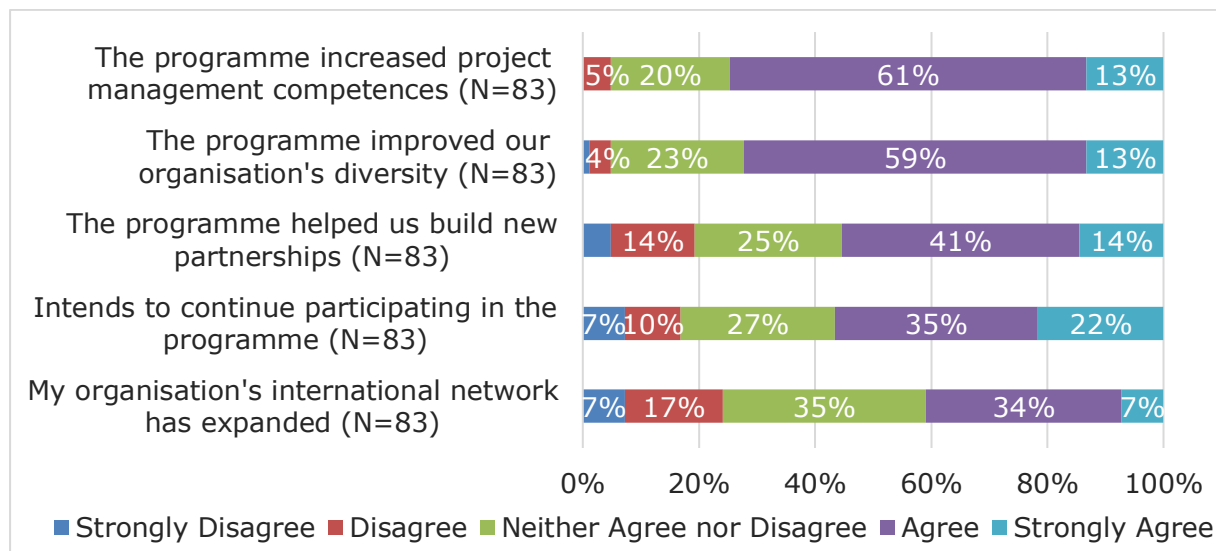
Source: survey of individual participants. Question 37: 'Were you engaged in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities in the 12 months before applying to become a volunteer with the European Solidarity Corps?' and question 41 'Were you engaged in the last 12 months in social, volunteering, solidarity or civic activities?', the data is subset from the participants in 2018-2020 projects.

## Results for organisations

The programme delivered positive results for organisations, such as improving project management skills and diversity and inclusion practices. The Quality Label was particularly well perceived for its effects on project management practices and recognition. Despite these successes, organisations reported some concerns about guidance and financial support to participants with fewer opportunities, although the majority acknowledged the programme's contribution to increasing accessibility and commitment to inclusion.

**Participating organisations generally positively assessed the influence of the programme on them** (see figure below). Organisations regarded the improvement of project management skills and diversity and inclusion practices especially well and intended to keep participating in the programme.

**Figure 24. European Solidarity Corps influence on organisations, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of organisations. Question 29 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?', the data is subset from the organisations that participated in the 2018-2020 period.

**The Quality Label received overwhelmingly positive feedback from organisations that participated in the programme in the 2018-2020 period.** It promoted the delivery of high-quality solidarity and volunteering activities (71%, 59, N=83) and supported the safety and well-being of volunteers (62%, 51, N=82). In addition, 59% (48, N=81) of organisations felt that the certification process motivated them to continually assess and improve operations.

In addition, the European Solidarity Corps inadvertently led to the **multiplication of European youth projects** and the dissemination of information, thereby increasing the collective knowledge base of organisations involved in youth work. Active European Solidarity Corps organisations became knowledge hubs, sharing their expertise and experience with other regional and local bodies. This led to an **increase in demand for their services**, demonstrating the wider impact of the programme in building collaborative and informed networks (see box below).

#### **Box 14. Cases of unintended outcomes, European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020**

The role of the programme in promoting community engagement in Türkiye was particularly noteworthy. **The creation of volunteer and activity centres** as a result of European Solidarity Corps participation was not foreseen but it ultimately has strengthened community ties and created new avenues for civic participation. An example of this was the cooperation between a European Solidarity Corps organisation and a Turkish municipality to establish an international youth and volunteer centre. Such initiatives extended the reach of the programme, facilitating leadership development and knowledge transfer across borders.

In Spain, the programme fostered collaboration and knowledge sharing between participating organisations, leading to the creation of informal networks and communities of practice. These networks **facilitated the exchange of information** on a range of issues, including volunteer recruitment, project practices and funding sources. In particular, new projects emerged from these networks, demonstrating the programme's ability to inspire new initiatives.

**Four out of five organisations confirmed that the programme effectively supports volunteers with fewer opportunities (82%, 67, N=82). However, they faced challenges with finding willing consortium partners and receiving sufficient guidance and financial support.** Organisations were not certain that they were well-equipped to support the volunteers with fewer opportunities. Only half of the surveyed organisations reported that (53%, 43, N=81), and a smaller share admitted that it was easy to find consortium partners who were well-prepared for this task (28%, 23, N=81). Despite that, only half of the surveyed organisations agreed that they received sufficient guidance on inclusion (49%, 40, N=82), while an even smaller share of organisations agreed that the financial support (i.e. inclusion support/grants or exceptional costs) provided by the programme was adequate for the participation of these volunteers (47%, 38, N=81).

Challenges can potentially also be linked to **the visibility of intersectional and other 'hidden' barriers to the opportunities of young people**, such as mental health issues. Indeed, if only 20% (N=3 575) of surveyed young people mentioned most young people of their age had more opportunities than them, 2 708 respondents reported some obstacles in life. Around half of the respondents tried but could not find a job, a quarter had mental health problems during the time they applied to the programme, 22% could only afford basic necessities, and 18% lived far away from major urban centres. This gave some evidence that young people as well may not always disclose their underprivileged status.

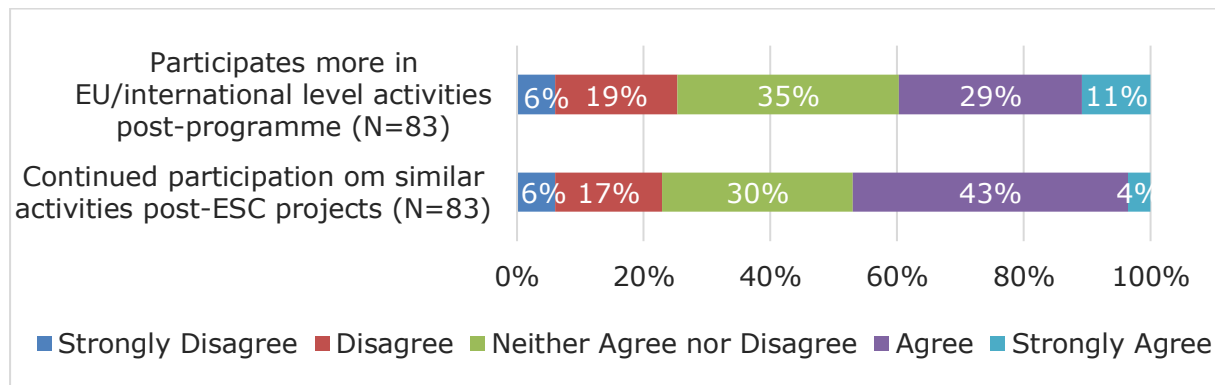
### **3.3.3. IMPACTS**

**The programme effectively addressed community or societal challenges.** It strengthened local communities by addressing local challenges, creating opportunities (especially in rural, isolated or marginalised areas), strengthening social ties and increasing civic engagement. The overwhelming majority of surveyed participating organisations agreed or strongly agreed that the work of the European Solidarity Corps volunteers had directly addressed important needs and improved the well-being of communities and societal groups (80%, 56, N=70). The European Solidarity Corps increased the awareness and interest of local community members in volunteering and solidarity activities and contributed to developing a positive attitude towards the EU.

**The overwhelming majority of individual participants from all programme strands recognised the positive impact of the programme on young people’s personal, educational, social, civic, cultural and professional development** (92%, 3 074, N=3 338). Young people acquired new skills and capacities, expressed their creativity, took responsibility for their actions, increased their autonomy and motivation to learn, and improved their local and English language skills. The aspect of solidarity and commitment promoted the spread of social entrepreneurship concepts among young people and increased their willingness to get involved.

**The programme incentivised some participating organisations to explore similar volunteering and solidarity activities outside the European Solidarity Corps** (see figure below). 47% (39, N=83) reported that their organisation continued to be involved in similar volunteering and solidarity activities after the programme. 40% (33, N=83) of organisations mentioned that they participated in the activities at the EU or international level after the programme. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic limited the ability of organisations and communities to sustain the effects of the programme.

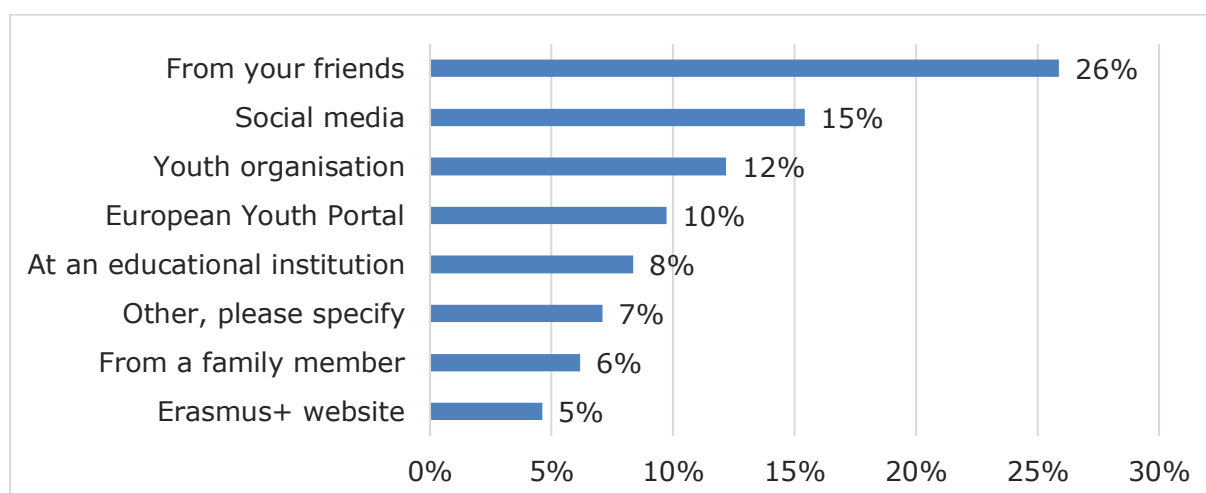
**Figure 25. The European Solidarity Corps impact on organisations, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of organisations. Question 29 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your participation in the European Solidarity Corps programme on your organisation?', the data is subset from the organisations that participated in the 2018-2020 period.

**The European Solidarity Corps became active in the 2018-2020 period. Therefore, the programme had to promote itself among target groups.** The survey shows that participants heard about the European Solidarity Corps mainly **through friends, social media and a combination of youth organisations and educational institutions** (see figure below). With a total of 3 620 respondents, the most common source was friends, from whom 26% (937) had heard about the programme. Social media was the next most important source, cited by 15% (558) of respondents. The combination of youth organisations and educational institutions informed 21% (744) of participants about the programme.

**Figure 26. Leading information sources about the European Solidarity Corps, 2018-2020**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 24 'How did you first learn about the European Solidarity Corps?' (N=3 620). Please, note that items with value less than 4% are removed from the chart. The data is subset from the participants in 2018-2020 projects.

**Youth organisations and educational institutions played an important role in sharing the information about the programme. Indeed, 83% (800, N=965) actively shared the outputs and results of their European Solidarity Corps projects. However, participating organisations gave a modest assessment of their experience in disseminating the results of the European Solidarity Corps programme. Only 41% (399, N=964) agreed or strongly agreed that there was sufficient funding available to support the sharing and exploitation of project results. Moreover, 47% (447, N=958) felt that the programme provided adequate guidance on how to effectively share and promote project activities and results. On the other hand, more than half of organisations (51%, 490, N=960) shared and used good practices shared by other organisations. 58% (557, N=962) mentioned that the programme supported the sharing of best practices and success stories between organisations.**

### 3.4. EFFICIENCY

#### Box 15. Summary conclusions

- **Funding** was deemed appropriate for this funding period, given that the funding absorbed reached only 79.4%. This view was shared by a subset of interviewed stakeholders. The low uptake in payments is not an indicator of excessive funding but of inflexible budget allocations and distortions due to the COVID-19 crisis.
- The **administrative burden** was reasonable. The majority of participants, organisations and individuals alike provided a positive assessment of how the programme was run.
- **Programme implementation** is difficult to assess reliably due to data discrepancies in the output and budgetary data of the previous programming period. Tentative assessment indicates a good cost-effectiveness compared to the parallel EU Aid Volunteers Initiative.
- **Programme management** was seen as moderately efficient. However, organisations were somewhat critical of the user-friendliness of programme management tools.

### 3.4.1. FUNDING

**The lack of funding was not a major concern for the 2018-2020 period, as the delayed adoption of the European Solidarity Corps Regulation in October 2018 meant that the Commission was unable to spend the budget allocated for 2018 in the remaining two months of 2018. The remaining money was used in subsequent years until 2020.** By 2022, around 20% of funds had not been used. The European Solidarity Corps programme had a very slow start, with only 15% of the total budget allocated to 2018, indicating that European Solidarity Corps programme management was adapting to the late start. In 2019, as the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps gained momentum, the budget utilisation rate increased, given the increase in activities. However, detailed monitoring data for the budget of this period is unavailable or has significant reporting gaps, making it impossible to trace the developments accurately.

Despite the low grant uptake, there seems to have been inefficient budget allocation in terms of geography and action. Funds that were initially allocated for the less popular activities, such as traineeships, are unlikely to have been fully utilised given the low number of participants.

The budget allocated to traineeships, which constituted roughly 7% of the total budget, continued to increase its funding despite the strand consistently achieving only 5% of its participant targets.

**Participating organisations gave modest feedback on the financial aspects of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2018-2020.** 52% (45, N=86) agreed or strongly agreed that the financial support received was sufficient to cover their participation costs. However, less than half of the organisations (42%, N=85) agreed that the unit cost rates were sufficient to cover actual costs.

**The allocation of the budget for the European Solidarity Corps programme has been consistent with the allocation specified in Regulation 2018/1475 on the key actions<sup>151</sup>.** The regulation does not specify how the budget should be allocated in detail; however, it does specify how the budget should be distributed between the different operational objectives organised under three actions:

- 90% for Volunteering and Solidarity projects
- 10 % for either traineeships or jobs, or both, with a maximum of 20 % for in-country activities.

The regulation also stipulated in Article 9 (3) that the budget 'may also cover expenses pertaining to preparatory, monitoring, control, audit and evaluation activities which are required for the management of the European Solidarity Corps and the achievement of its objectives, in particular, studies, meetings of experts and information and communication actions, expenses linked to the establishment, maintenance and updating of the European Solidarity Corps Portal and the necessary IT support systems, and all other technical and administrative assistance expenses incurred by the Commission for the management of the European Solidarity Corps<sup>152</sup>, but did not set financial constraints for these.

The European Solidarity Corps differentiated between the budget allocated to in-country and cross-country volunteering, which is required by the regulation. This requirement

<sup>151</sup> EU (2018), 'REGULATION (EU) 2018/1475 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 2 October 2018 laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps and amending Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, Regulation (EU) No 1293/2013 and Decision No 1313/2013/EU', retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018R1475>

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

stems from the regulation setting a maximum of 20% of spending for in-country activities. However, the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2021 exceeded the specified maximum of 20% slightly by allocating 23.6% of the budget overall to in-country volunteering. This is likely a consequence of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited cross-country mobility because the programme was well within the threshold prior to the outbreak, only overshooting in 2020 by 5%<sup>153</sup>.

**The European Solidarity Corps did not use results-based budgeting but tailored the budget to the three actions, listing volunteering and solidarity projects separately.** Thus, the share of the total budget to be apportioned was linked with expected outcomes or activity levels.

**The rationale behind the budget allocation in relation to expected activities and outcomes was unclear.** The Annual Work Programmes over 2018-2020 were specific about the levels of outcomes that the European Solidarity Corps was expected to achieve. Each of the Annual Work Programmes described expected results in a generic manner without setting concrete targets. This made it difficult to judge whether the budget was aligned with the outcomes expected and with the changes that the European Solidarity Corps sought to achieve.

**Detailed financial absorption levels across all action types are not evaluable** due to the gaps and limitations in the 2018-2020 budgetary data<sup>154</sup>.

### 3.4.2. ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

**Participation in the European Solidarity Corps has not been viewed as burdensome by the majority of participants, organisations and individuals alike.** Most participants (65%, N=3 372) and participating organisations (57%, N=86) have deemed the various administrative tasks and reporting requirements to be reasonable, a slight increase for participants and stable for organisations compared to the previous programming period.

**The project application procedures attracted a moderately positive assessment of the participating organisations.** 69% (N=86) agreed or strongly agreed that the information provided to applicants was clear and easy to understand. The guidance and support tools provided were considered user-friendly by 59% (N=86) of respondents. In addition, 69% (N=85) found the funding rules and calculation methods clear, and 59% (N=86) felt that the administrative requirements were well matched to the amount of funding requested. Last, 66% (N=86) considered the time between submitting the application and receiving the grant to have been reasonable.

### 3.4.3. EFFICIENCY OF PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

**The European Solidarity Corps has been cost-effective** when calculating cost-effectiveness by using comparable data. The European Solidarity Corps achieved a cost-effectiveness of € 7 160.28 per participant, approximately 7 times more cost-effective than the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative (€49 168.47), which ran in parallel<sup>155</sup>. When it comes to the cost-effectiveness per organisation, the European Solidarity Corps is still 2.5 times more cost-effective, €45 691.51 for European Solidarity Corps vs. €127 102.80 for the EU

<sup>153</sup> DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2014-2020; date of extraction: 5 January 2024), % of In-Country Grant Amount Contracted

<sup>154</sup> DG EAC frozen monitoring dashboard (MFF 2014-2020; date of extraction: 5 January 2024)

<sup>155</sup> PPMI calculation based on EU (2023), 'MFF Performance Results Report', retrieved from [https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf)

Aid Volunteers Initiative<sup>156</sup>. While this is to be expected as the amount of training required and the distance and length of deployment for EU Aid Volunteers is much higher than for the European Solidarity Corps, the magnitude of the difference per participant is striking. This is likely caused by the changed design of the European Solidarity Corps, which allowed more participants per organisation, which in turn led to scaling effects. The smaller programme scale of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative did not allow for scaling effects to the same degree as the European Solidarity Corps.

**The European Solidarity Corps programme invested significant resources in preparing quality reference documents that have been useful to the implementation of the programme.** The European Solidarity Corps has spent approximately 13% of its yearly budget, or €16 million yearly, on training<sup>157</sup>. This work contributed to the development of key features of the programme, among them the careful considerations for volunteers' security, uniform approach to volunteer training, certification process for organisations, volunteer management, and the governance of partners. These elements have contributed to the effectiveness of the European Solidarity Corps.

**The assessment of the extent of the implementation of actions in direct and indirect management having been appropriate, efficient, and well-functioning has been inconclusive due to a lack of data** about the actual budget spent under direct management actions (for example, on insurance).

#### 3.4.4. EFFICIENCY OF PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

**The programme management tools were generally efficient.** Roughly 60% (N=86) of the organisations have found the guidance and support tools for the project application process to be user-friendly, while only 14% disagreed. However, opinions about the beneficiary and reporting tools have been mixed. While 36% (N=85) of organisations found the Mobility Tool+ user-friendly, another 20% disliked it<sup>158</sup>. Moreover, most organisations (68%, N=86) reported that information for applicants was clear and easy to understand.

**The European Solidarity Corps Portal was useful, but a considerable share of the organisations were not entirely happy with its functionality or their experience as users.** 37% (32, N=87) of organisations said that it was easy to find volunteers through the European Solidarity Corps Portal (42% neither agreed nor disagreed)<sup>159</sup>. Corresponding to this, 14% (N=87) of organisations went on further to state that the time it took to recruit volunteers had not met their needs<sup>160</sup>. Organisations also relied on supporting organisations to find applicants. Organisations also reported that they often referred to their own informal networks to gain additional information on candidates that were not on the portal or to receive a second opinion on the personality or reliability of candidates. Organisations said that the information on prospective participants on the portal was rather superficial<sup>161</sup>. Taken together, these suggest that the user-friendliness of programme management tools could have been better.

**During the evaluation period, the European Solidarity Corps had to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.** This affected participants' engagement with the programme, but the majority of individual participants (78%, 1 523, N=1 943) confirmed that the

<sup>156</sup> PPMI calculation based on EU (2023), 'MFF Performance Results Report', retrieved from [https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://Commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf)

<sup>157</sup> European Solidarity Corps Annual Work Programmes (2021-2023)

<sup>158</sup> Survey of organisations. Question 20 'To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Solidarity Corps project management and reporting procedures during the 2018-2020 period?'

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Interview programme

programme provided sufficient support to handle the crisis. 70% (1 363, N=1 939) of participants noted that some planned activities were moved online, while 32% (616) experienced a change in the thematic focus of their project. 22% (423) of respondents reported changes in the project's target communities and social groups. The pandemic caused 16% (319) to postpone their participation, and 8% (150) had to end their activity prematurely without the possibility of completing it remotely. Meanwhile, 6% (109) left their activity early but managed to complete it remotely. This adaptability is chiefly due to the programme's ability to quickly adjust and respond to unforeseen events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Solidarity Corps' swift response to the immediate needs of beneficiaries during these emergencies highlights its considerable potential to adapt operations to changing situations<sup>162</sup>.

**However, feedback suggests that sustaining the flexibility in reporting requirements over the longer term presented challenges, as programme rules could not be continuously adapted.** Particularly, there was room for improvement in how the programme engaged volunteers whose placements were cancelled due to COVID-19. While the central European Solidarity Corps management laid the groundwork for the resolution of unprecedented events, the actual implementation and necessary adaptations occurred predominantly at the local level. This points towards a potential area for improvement in the programme's design, ensuring intrinsic flexibility at all levels and over the longer term.

**The participating organisations reported a positive opinion about the National Agencies and/or EACEA's support during the COVID-19 pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic affected 55% (530, N=971) of surveyed organisations. 60% (313, N=520) of them contacted National Agencies, and only 2% (12) asked the EACEA for assistance. 74% (233, N=314) agreed that National Agencies and/or EACEA provided clear guidelines to ensure the safety of volunteers. Similarly, 78% (245, N=314) were satisfied with the support and guidance provided to the organisation. 83% (262, N=316) appreciated the flexibility shown by the National Agencies and/or EACEA in accommodating necessary project changes due to the pandemic. Efficiency of programme implementation.

### 3.4.5. PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND MONITORING (RACER CRITERIA)

The study looks at three main topics to evaluate the efficiency of performance measurement and monitoring. First, the study uses the RACER (relevant, accepted, credible, easy to monitor, robust) criteria, which is a set of standards to ensure that the programme has been measuring the right things in the right way in the Better Regulation Toolbox of the European Commission. Second, the efficiency of tools and methods for tracking progress, by checking they are providing accurate and timely information. Lastly, the study checks whether the European Solidarity Corps has been measuring aligns with what was initially set out to measure in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.

#### ***Relevance and Acceptability***

Regarding relevance, the **indicators used by the Commission for monitoring are deemed relevant but not necessarily comprehensive.** Indicators used for monitoring are **compliance and output.** Indicators used for monitoring are more **compliance-focused rather than oriented towards measuring impact.** While compliance indicators are essential for ensuring adherence to regulations and guidelines, they may not fully capture the broader impact of the programme in achieving its objectives. **However,**

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<sup>162</sup> Interview programme

**the indicators that were utilised by the Commission for monitoring have been generally acceptable and fulfil the essential requirements.**

### ***Credibility***

**In terms of credibility, the performance management of the European Solidarity Corps has an inherent constraint due to self-reporting and the lack of clearly operationalised definitions across the board for participants with fewer opportunities.** Without a universally operationalised definition of ‘participants with fewer opportunities’, it has been challenging to identify and measure the impact of the programme on this group in a credible manner. While it is recognised that this is a sensitive and complex issue, the lack of a clear indicators remains a challenge. This ambiguity potentially undermines the accurate measurement of the programme’s impact on this target group. Different organisations or individuals have been interpreting this term differently, leading to inconsistencies in data collection and analysis. The self-reporting of participants has the potential to introduce bias as participants might overstate or understate their contributions or experiences based on their perceptions or personal interests. This can affect the accuracy of the data collected and, subsequently, the programme’s performance evaluation. Without clear definitions of inclusion, it can be difficult to verify the appropriate allocation of resources to inclusion targets. The above factors have led to credibility issues as these performance outcomes might not accurately reflect the actual impact of the programme.

### ***Ease of Monitoring***

**While the indicators chosen by the Commission were easy to monitor in theory, not all data in monitoring dashboards was complete.** This highlights the need for a more robust data verification process to reduce instances of misreported or missing data. This could involve cross-checking data from different sources or using automated tools to detect anomalies.

### ***Robustness***

**The robustness of the European Solidarity Corps’ performance management was sufficient.** However, missing data had a negative impact on the accuracy of performance assessments, suggesting that data verification of important measures and processes could have been improved.

## **3.5. EU ADDED VALUE**

### **3.5.1. SCOPE AND VOLUME EFFECTS**

#### **Box 12. Summary conclusions**

- European Solidarity Corps contributed to an **enhanced sense of European identity**.
- The programme promoted **active citizenship** and facilitated participants’ **personal development** on a scale unlikely to be achieved through national efforts.

- The move from the European Voluntary Service to the European Solidarity Corps had enhanced EU added value by establishing a **single, accessible entry point for solidarity activities**, and **increased ambition and visibility**.
- By **broadening its scope, enhancing flexibility, and reinforcing objectives of inclusion**, the European Solidarity Corps was better positioned than the European Voluntary Service to **meet the contemporary needs of youth**.
- The programme offered **enhanced international networking** and collaboration difficult to achieve through national volunteering initiatives.

The scope and volume effects of the European Solidarity Corps' EU added value encompassed an enhanced sense of European identity. Additionally, it promoted active citizenship and facilitated participants' personal development on a scale unlikely to be achieved through national efforts alone.

**The European Solidarity Corps significantly enhanced the sense of European identity by offering extensive cross-border volunteering opportunities.** 71% (2 375) of participants reported a strengthened European identity following their involvement, underlining the programme's effectiveness in fostering a collective identity and appreciation for values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights. The European Solidarity Corps was also instrumental in promoting active citizenship. It addressed the growing concerns of anti-EU and anti-democratic sentiments by encouraging young Europeans to engage more actively in civic life. Notably, 60% of participants (2 012) reported an increased motivation to engage more actively in their community's social and political life, showcasing the programme's role in stimulating civic engagement.

**Moreover, the European Solidarity Corps was a powerful initiative for empowering youth, facilitating their transition from education to the labour market** (see more in section 2.5.1). This was particularly critical for those at the outset of their careers or those facing employment challenges. The programme was lauded for its substantial impact on participants' personal and professional development, with an impressive 92% (3 074) acknowledging its positive effects in this regard, unlikely to be reached at the national level alone.

### 3.5.2.PROCESS AND INNOVATION

In the transformation from the European Voluntary Service to the European Solidarity Corps, the European solidarity and volunteerism landscape had evolved to expand its scope, flexibility, and objectives. While this shift has encountered some hurdles, particularly in IT integration, **the move from the European Voluntary Service to the European Solidarity Corps has enhanced EU added value by establishing a single, accessible entry point for solidarity activities and increased ambition and visibility.**

'<...> Solidarity Corps may be the only of the few [comparable EU] programmes which rely on solidarity. The former EVS was called a voluntary service for a reason. When you look at the European Solidarity Corps, sometimes I think it's still understood as a volunteering programme, and not also as an opportunities programme.' - Interview Programme with International Organisations and Networks

**By broadening its scope, enhancing flexibility, and reinforcing objectives of inclusion, the European Solidarity Corps was better positioned than the European**

**Voluntary Service to meet the contemporary needs of youth**<sup>163</sup>. The European Solidarity Corps distinguishes itself from its predecessor, the European Voluntary Service, through an expanded scope. Unlike the European Voluntary Service, which was primarily focused on volunteering, the European Solidarity Corps introduced additional avenues, including a solidarity traineeships and jobs strand (although deemed incoherent and discontinued, see more in section 3.2.1). This diversification reflected the evolving concept of volunteering, acknowledging that solidarity can take many forms. Furthermore, the European Solidarity Corps empowers disadvantaged young people through solidarity projects by providing them with leadership opportunities, direct access to funding and the chance to address local community needs and inspire wider social change<sup>164</sup>.

In line with that, the European Solidarity Corps was noted to have increased flexibility, a marked improvement over the European Voluntary Service. It supported a variety of volunteering project formats and activities, **better recognising the dynamic nature of modern volunteering**. This flexibility catered to the varied needs and situations of youth, ensuring that a broader demographic could find a mode of participation that resonates with them. The European Solidarity Corps was also viewed as more encompassing than its predecessor, as it also emphasised domestic volunteering and solidarity activities, specifically targeting young people who face challenges such as language barriers or difficulties in finding volunteering opportunities abroad<sup>165</sup>. This approach ensured that the benefits of volunteering and solidarity were accessible to a broader demographic, thereby promoting social cohesion and inclusion.

The introduction of domestic volunteering under the European Solidarity Corps has enabled a wider demographic, including those lacking language skills and confidence, to engage in volunteering. However, the transition from the European Voluntary Service to the European Solidarity Corps also signified a shift towards more significant and higher-quality international opportunities<sup>166</sup>. For participating organisations, the shift to the European Solidarity Corps enhanced networking opportunities, connecting local organisations with international bodies and thereby fostering a more interconnected approach to solidarity. This was accompanied by **better branding and increased publicity**, elevating the visibility of local initiatives on a global stage<sup>167</sup>.

### 3.5.3. NETWORK EFFECT

**The European Solidarity Corps greatly improved intercultural dialogue and understanding among young Europeans due to its transnational nature.** This distinctive feature enabled participants to experience a variety of cultures and viewpoints, in stark contrast to the domestically oriented experiences provided by national schemes. A primary added value of the European Solidarity Corps at a European level was its **promotion of pan-European networks, which often resulted in enduring partnerships**. Survey findings indicated that a significant number of organisations (64%, 626) acknowledged that the programme had facilitated the formation of new partnerships continuing well past the duration of specific projects. Additionally, 62% (606) of organisations observed an expansion of their international networks as a direct outcome of their participation in the European Solidarity Corps. **This level of enhanced international networking and collaboration would have been difficult to achieve through national volunteering initiatives.** The programme showcased added value in nurturing long-lasting connections between participants, with 76% (2 560) of respondents

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<sup>163</sup> Interview programme

<sup>164</sup> Interview programme

<sup>165</sup> Interview programme

<sup>166</sup> Interview programme

<sup>167</sup> Interview programme

reporting ongoing communication with volunteers they met during the programme, highlighting the enduring nature of these intercultural exchanges.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE INTERIM EVALUATION FOR THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS 2021-2027 AND THE FINAL EVALUATION FOR THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS 2018-2020**

### **4.1. CONCLUSIONS ON THE RELEVANCE OF THE PROGRAMME**

The European Solidarity Corps is highly relevant to the evolving needs of European society, particularly in enhancing social cohesion, individual development, and inclusion. The programme's alignment with national and European needs enables it to facilitate tailored projects that effectively address both local and broader societal challenges. The European Solidarity Corps supports young people in making meaningful contributions to their communities and beyond by fostering a diverse range of volunteering opportunities. These opportunities align with the Commission's political priorities, such as democratic participation, inclusion, diversity, and environmental sustainability, and are effectively cascaded down to both national and individual levels. This relevance is underscored by the positive feedback from participants, who report significant personal growth and satisfaction with their involvement in the programme and meeting community needs.

On an organisational level, the European Solidarity Corps demonstrates a robust commitment to adapting its priorities to meet urgent societal needs, as seen in its responsive adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises. The programme's flexibility in terms of project formats and budget allocations enables it to provide timely support to communities facing unforeseen challenges. There is room for improvement in ensuring a balanced geographical spread of the programme within each participating country. This involves making sure that organisations and participants in various types of regions, including urban, mixed, and rural areas, are well-positioned to reap the benefits of participation.

Looking ahead, the programme is well-positioned to enhance its strategies for inclusivity and impact. While successful in implementing various inclusion measures, there is still an opportunity to deepen its involvement with young people who have fewer opportunities. This begins with better identification and understanding of their diverse needs, leading to improved accommodation of their unique situations and maximising the programme's benefits during formative periods. Notably, these benefits often extend to occupational gains, serving as a bridge to continued education or employment, especially for those facing job search difficulties. Additionally, building capacity within participating organisations to identify, recruit, and integrate these individuals from the start is essential.

### **4.2. CONCLUSIONS ON THE COHERENCE OF THE PROGRAMME**

The European Solidarity Corps has demonstrated strong internal and external coherence with the strategic priorities of the European Union, particularly in relation to youth engagement and the integration of EU policy initiatives. It maintains clear distinctions in its management actions, with both directly and indirectly managed actions enhancing the programme's effectiveness by serving varied participant needs. The streamlining of

volunteering activities, especially with the follow up action to the former EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, has improved not only the coherence of the programme but also its synergies, coordination, and visibility, contributing to a broader geographical reach and participation. At the same time, the transition from the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative to the European Solidarity Corps marked a shift in focus towards a more individualised and learning-centred approach, in line with the programme's priorities as a youth-focused initiative.

However, the possible integration of the European Solidarity Corps with Erasmus+ presents both opportunities and challenges. Stakeholders are divided: while some see the integration as a means to increase administrative efficiency and resource flexibility, others express concerns that it could dilute the unique focus of the European Solidarity Corps on volunteering and solidarity, potentially weakening its foundational values and impact. This highlights the critical need to consider how these opportunities and challenges could be best managed under the next Multiannual Financial Framework of the European Commission.

Externally, the European Solidarity Corps aligns well with other EU policy initiatives, especially those aimed at enhancing youth participation and democratic engagement in line with the EU's broader strategic priorities. The programme complements other relevant EU programmes like Erasmus+, but actual synergies are somewhat limited, suggesting a need for more structured efforts to leverage these relationships fully. A promising example of synergy in this context is the programme's recent co-delegation agreement with Horizon Europe, which supports youth participation in volunteering activities in common priority areas. The benefits of this synergy could be further enhanced by a structured model of cooperation from the outset of the programme and could serve as an example of good practice for cooperation with other programmes. In addition, given the observed occupational benefits for vulnerable youth, as volunteering not only enhanced professional and transversal skills but also served as structured engagement and a low-barrier option, the programme could be better linked with other EU youth employment initiatives, particularly those aimed at NEET (not in employment, education or training) youth. Strengthening these connections would further support vulnerable youth in transitioning to continued education or employment. Additionally, the integration of European Solidarity Corps activities with national programmes varies, indicating a potential for improved coordination to enhance the impact and reach of volunteering efforts across the EU.

### **4.3. CONCLUSIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAMME**

The European Solidarity Corps is well-designed to create a cycle of benefits that permeates effectively through its target groups—individuals, organisations, and communities. This results in systemic impacts aligned with European values of solidarity, inclusion, and diversity, as well as the Commission's horizontal priorities.

At the individual level, participants in the European Solidarity Corps programme receive significant personal, professional, and educational growth, as well as an increase in civic engagement and social awareness. Additionally, the European Solidarity Corps has made strides in fostering greater European integration and cultural exchange among its participants. By enabling young individuals from diverse backgrounds to collaborate on projects across different countries, the programme has successfully promoted a deeper understanding of multiculturalism and European identity. This aspect not only enriches the participants' personal experiences but also strengthens the bonds between different Member States, supporting the EU's broader goal of fostering unity and cooperation across the continent.

For organisations, the European Solidarity Corps has facilitated significant improvements in project management, diversity, and inclusion practices. The introduction of the Quality Label, a hallmark of the programme, has been instrumental in enhancing project delivery and organisational capabilities. Organisations improved their project planning, implementation, and reporting, with the Quality Label positively influencing their fundraising capabilities and overall project management standards. The programme has driven organisations to adopt better practices for diversity and inclusion, enabling them to work more effectively with volunteers from various backgrounds, including those with fewer opportunities. Additionally, organisations gained access to a broader network of international partnerships and capacity-building opportunities, enhancing their ability to deliver impactful projects and sustain their activities beyond the programme's lifespan.

At the local and community level, the European Solidarity Corps strengthened social cohesion and intercultural understanding while addressing local challenges. While the programme successfully fosters community engagement, leadership development, and collaborative organisational networks, it has faced some challenges in adapting to the specific needs of remote or socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Ensuring adequate support and resources for these regions, especially through increased involvement of local organisations, is essential to maximise the programme's impact.

#### **4.4. CONCLUSIONS ON THE EFFICIENCY OF THE PROGRAMME**

The European Solidarity Corps demonstrates a commendable level of efficiency in its operations, albeit with room for improvement in several key areas.

The funding for the European Solidarity Corps has proven inadequate relative to the programme's ambitions and broader objectives. Despite an increase in the annual budget compared to the previous period of 2018-2020, inflationary pressures have eroded the real value of these funds, compromising the programme's ability to achieve its goals. The provision of additional support to participants with fewer opportunities, while commendable, has added financial strain and further stretched the available resources. This highlights the importance of better aligning budget allocations with the actual needs of young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, and the ambition of promoting solidarity across the EU. The situation is compounded by the fact that the programme is hugely oversubscribed and - a direct result of an insufficient budget - allows only a fraction of those interested to participate. Given the programme's high relevance, effectiveness, and added value, it is well-positioned to be scaled up, amplifying the benefits it can offer to individuals, organisations, and communities, provided appropriate budget increases.

Programme implementation within the European Solidarity Corps has been efficient, with cost-effectiveness improving when compared to the previous period. Despite these gains, there are noticeable variations in cost-effectiveness across different actions within the programme, suggesting that some areas, particularly those requiring extensive infrastructure or greater mobility, may benefit from targeted financial strategies to enhance overall efficiency.

Programme management has demonstrated efficiency through effective collaboration with managing bodies and the flexibility to mitigate impacts from external shocks such as COVID-19 and geopolitical conflicts. However, the management of financial resources has shown some inefficiencies, particularly in the allocation and reallocation of funds across different programme strands and among countries with varying demands. This has occasionally led to underutilisation of funds in some areas while leaving high-demand areas underfunded, pointing to a need for more dynamic and responsive financial management practices.

Significant improvements have been made in the measurement and monitoring of the European Solidarity Corps, making the processes more comprehensive and granular. Nevertheless, challenges remain, particularly with the implementation of new IT tools that have not fully met the needs of users, impacting the overall effectiveness of monitoring efforts. Moreover, while performance indicators are better aligned, their practical application still needs refinement to fully capture the programme's impact and reach, especially for participants with fewer opportunities. Monitoring the geographical balance of participation and the spread of benefits across the participating countries is also essential. Improvements in these areas would solidify the grasp of the programme's effects and allow for real-time learning and improvement.

## **4.5. CONCLUSIONS ON EU-ADDED VALUE OF THE PROGRAMME**

The European Solidarity Corps creates a cycle of benefits that result in systemic impacts across its target groups while also promoting European values of solidarity, inclusion, and diversity and contributing to the achievement of the Commission's horizontal priorities. This constitutes the key overarching EU-added value of the programme, which could not be achieved by national efforts alone.

The European Solidarity Corps enriches the European landscape of youth empowerment and volunteering by providing a blend of benefits that extend beyond national borders. The programme strengthens European identity and fosters support for European values, with participants and organisations reporting a heightened sense of belonging to a broader European community. The cross-border engagements facilitated by the programme are also key in cultivating European identity and promoting shared Union values such as democracy and human rights.

In addition, the programme plays a critical role in empowering youth by offering unique opportunities for personal development that are often unavailable at a national level. More specifically, the programme complements formal education and equips young Europeans to contribute proactively to societal challenges. By doing so, the programme not only supports participants in developing essential transversal skills but may also aid their transition from education to the labour market, particularly for those facing prolonged periods of unemployment or temporary employment.

Moreover, the European Solidarity Corps showcases EU added-value in promoting quality and consistency across its projects, setting it apart from other national or regional initiatives available. The standards and comprehensive support provided to organisations ensure high-quality volunteering experiences. This commitment to quality is evident in the robust Quality Label process, which enhances the positive experience, safety, inclusiveness, and reputation of the projects and organisations involved.

The European Solidarity Corps also establishes extensive pan-European networks, fostering long-term partnerships that facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaborative initiatives across Europe and beyond. These networks enhance the capability of organisations to manage projects effectively, help attract additional resources, and engage in broader European dialogues. The ability of the European Solidarity Corps to connect organisations – fostering partnerships – and individuals – fostering friendships – across different regions and cultures promotes a more integrated and cohesive European Union and projects a positive image in third countries.

## 4.6. RECOMMENDATIONS

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### **Area for Improvement: Inclusion of people with fewer opportunities**

The programme's Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, introduced in 2021, has been crucial in promoting the participation of people with fewer opportunities through increased support services like mentoring and sign language interpretation, as well as enhanced accessibility and financial support. Efforts have led to improved accessibility of the programme, making it attractive and accessible to participants from diverse backgrounds, including people with fewer opportunities. To build on these efforts, there is room to **improve the identification and – in turn – provide targeted support to people with fewer opportunities to facilitate their participation in the programme.**

The current method of monitoring individuals with fewer opportunities relies on self-reporting by organisations and National Agencies. Due to the broad criteria defining people with fewer opportunities as outlined in the European Solidarity Corps regulation, this approach yields a wide margin of interpretation and potentially unreliable data. This, in turn, obscures the understanding and preparation needed to accommodate the specific circumstances and challenges participants face. Organisations frequently struggle to identify these individuals at the selection stage due to insufficient information. Typically, the specific challenges or backgrounds of these participants only become clear after they have arrived. This delay poses risks, as organisations are then not well-positioned to make the necessary arrangements to fully include and integrate more vulnerable individuals from the start.

A possible solution to enhance inclusion involves creating more opportunities for capacity building within organisations in the identification and integration of participants with fewer opportunities. This could be achieved through Inclusion and Diversity Officers within the National Agencies, with a focus on situational examples and exercises as part of capacity-building efforts. However, improved identification and understanding of PWFOs before their arrival is crucial, as the current information asymmetry poses risks to timely preparation.

### **Recommendations, addressed to the European Commission:**

- Further clarify the definition of young people with fewer opportunities. The European Solidarity Corps regulation defines 'young people with fewer opportunities (PWFOs)' as those who face obstacles to accessing opportunities under the Programme due to economic, social, cultural, geographical, or health reasons; migrant background; disability; educational difficulties; or any other reason that could lead to discrimination under Article 21 of the Charter. However, this definition allows for a broad interpretation of what specific circumstances each dimension entails. To assist organisations and other concerned stakeholders in their identification efforts, these dimensions could be further operationalised into more specific criteria for internal reference<sup>168</sup>.
- Implement strategies to improve the identification and understanding of PWFOs before their arrival to ensure information sharing and timely and adequate preparation. This could involve adding questions about their current occupation, self-identified economic status, and PWFO status.
- Create more opportunities for capacity building within organisations to better identify and integrate participants with fewer opportunities. Incorporate situational

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<sup>168</sup> A potential model for consideration is proposed by the evaluation team in the annexed case study on the contribution of the European Solidarity Corps to enhanced social inclusion and diversity.

examples and exercises as key components of capacity-building programmes to prepare organisations for the specific challenges and circumstances faced by PWFOs. Involve Inclusion and Diversity Officers from the National Agencies in organising these exercises to ensure they align with the goals of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy.

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### **Area for Improvement: Addressing possible variations in geographical distribution of results and impacts**

In order to implement the solidarity objective of the programme, it is essential to ensure a fair and balanced geographical distribution of its results and benefits within the participating countries. This means achieving balanced participation of organisations both from urban areas and from outside the capitals and other major metropolitan areas. Monitoring the geographical balance of participation and the distribution of benefits across the participating countries is crucial for this purpose.

The programme's current monitoring indicators for the location of participating organisations do not provide data in an aggregated form and are not ready-to-use for continuous learning and improvement of the programme. This is complicated by the fact that the location of an organisation's registration does not necessarily coincide with where its activities take place, where volunteers primarily operate, or where the community benefits are realised. Therefore, better monitoring and understanding of the geographical distribution of the programme is needed to accurately assess the geographical spread of its benefits.

#### **Recommendation, addressed to the European Commission:**

- Continue to enhance monitoring mechanisms to track where volunteer activities are taking place and ensure accurate geographical data.
- Further improve the availability of ready-to-use data on the geographical distribution of organisations and volunteer activities, in particular when it comes to monitoring the spread of activities across rural and urban areas.
- If geographical imbalances are identified, take active measures to encourage the participation of organisations from underrepresented types of regions in consultation with the programme's national implementation bodies, in particular, National Agencies. This can be achieved through additional visibility efforts and support, such as workshop sessions on application processes and the attainment of quality labels.

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### **Area for Improvement: Improving visa arrangements for third-country nationals**

The programme demonstrates a strong commitment to addressing societal needs through volunteering and solidarity initiatives, emphasising equal opportunity participation. However, volunteers and organisations have highlighted persisting issues with visa arrangements for third-country nationals.

#### **Recommendation, addressed to the National Agencies:**

Enhance collaboration with relevant institutions to streamline the visa delivery process for participants from third countries. This coordinated approach can facilitate smoother and more efficient access, ensuring that all eligible participants are able to join the programme without undue delay or complication.

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## **Area for Improvement: Alignment of goals and funding**

The European Solidarity Corps demonstrates an overall commendable level of efficiency in its operations. However, the funding for the European Solidarity Corps has been akin to a pilot programme and is too small to achieve what it set out. While the programme has an overall higher budget available per year than in the previous programming period, it has also become more costly to run. The first cost increase was due to inflation, which was 17.4% between 2021 and 2023. Additionally, the European Solidarity Corps funded additional inclusion support of ca. 21% of unit costs to projects with participants with fewer opportunities. This means that despite the budget increase, the European Solidarity Corps (2021-2027) has less money available per year to achieve its goals due to inflationary pressure diminishing a large portion of the budget increase.

### **Recommendations, addressed to the European Commission:**

- Consider increasing the overall budget of the European Solidarity Corps programme by planning for annual budget increases rather than a flat budget. These changes will make the project more resilient to economic shocks and allow for scalability.
- In line with an overall increase in the budget, introduce an annual review of the appropriateness of unit costs. This would allow the programme to respond to the needs of organisations and participants without compromising the quality of projects.
- Subject to an appropriate budget increase, there is substantial potential to scale the programme more ambitiously. This includes better integration of volunteering in the European Solidarity Corps and with other policy initiatives. For example, volunteers could benefit more from initiatives aiming to support occupational transitions and the needs of NEET (not in employment, education or training) and other vulnerable youth.
- The programme could also increase efforts to maximise and further develop synergies with other programmes in order to leverage existing funding and address common programme objectives. For example, the co-delegation agreement with Horizon Europe is a positive example of synergy within the current European Solidarity Corps. Its benefits could be further enhanced through a structured model of cooperation from the outset of the programme to make the overall annual budget more predictable for stakeholders and beneficiaries.

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## **Area for Improvement: IT systems and landscapes**

IT systems are critical to efficient programme management, providing the data collection and analysis necessary for informed decision-making and timely interventions. While the European Solidarity Corps' IT systems have improved compared to previous programming periods, their user-friendliness and functionality require further attention.

The application tools have been received more positively than in the previous programming period, especially by participants, but there is room to further simplify them for organisations. Support tools for participants, such as the general online training, have seen low uptake by participants, while online language support received mixed reviews. Furthermore, although the reporting tools have become more mature and stable since 2023, there are still challenges in terms of usability and reliability. Finally, the monitoring of the programme has become more comprehensive and detailed than in the previous programming period, but the monitoring tools have also become more complex to use.

When online tools cannot be used correctly by users or experience downtime, they pose challenges to the efficient implementation of the programme and carry risks such as data loss and delayed reporting. To address these issues, the European Solidarity Corps should continue to improve the functioning of IT tools at all levels, including user testing and the establishment of robust alternative reporting mechanisms.

### **Recommendations, addressed to the European Commission:**

- Conduct comprehensive user testing with a diverse group of end users to identify usability issues and ensure that all IT tools meet the needs of all stakeholders prior to deployment and updates.
- Further simplify online tools and forms used by organisations during the application process. Improve functionalities of search and match tools, such as PASS, to enable organisations to filter and select suitable candidates more easily.
- Ensure that contingency measures are in place to maintain data integrity and continuity when IT tools for reporting are unavailable so that data can still be captured in a complete and timely manner, especially at the final stage.
- To ensure a more comprehensive and accurate overview, monitoring data from all centrally managed activities of the programme (i.e. Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas and the humanitarian aid strand) should be integrated more deeply and comprehensively into the existing European Solidarity Corps monitoring systems.

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### **Area for Improvement: Alignment of the humanitarian aid strand as part of a youth programme**

The transition from the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative to the European Solidarity Corps marked a shift in focus towards a more individualised and learning-centred approach. The new strand focuses on providing opportunities for young volunteers to gain learning experiences through participation in humanitarian action. There is room for further clarifying and communicating the purpose of the strand to stakeholders in order to better manage their expectations and help to further align the strand with the objectives of the European Solidarity Corps as an inclusive and youth-focused initiative. At the same time, the strand's higher age limit of 35 years, compared to 30 years for all other volunteering and solidarity activities under the programme, poses a challenge to its internal coherence and contributes to perceived ambiguities among stakeholders.

### **Recommendations, addressed to the European Commission:**

- Clearly identify to participating organisations that the primary objective and purpose of the strand is to provide individual mobility and learning to volunteers, who should not be expected to necessarily have professional skills and significant experience in the field prior to volunteering. Ensure that this objective is communicated to the programme's stakeholders, particularly hosting and supporting organisations, including all relevant programme materials used by DG EAC and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency. This would help to manage participants' expectations and better align the strand with the overarching objectives of the programme. Positive organisational and community effects should still be expected when supporting volunteering opportunities for individuals and teams. As with the 'mainstream' part of the European Solidarity Corps, positive effects would typically include growing organisational capacity as more volunteers are involved and access to various supporting actions for vulnerable local communities is improved.

- Consider aligning the age limit of the humanitarian aid strand with the rest of the programme, as the demand from people between 30 and 35 years old is not high and represents only 3% of the total registrants for this strand. This would also improve the internal coherence of the programme and reduce perceived inconsistencies

## 5. FINAL EVALUATION OF THE EU AID VOLUNTEERS INITIATIVE 2014-2020

This evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative follows an initial 'ex-post' evaluation of the Initiative, which covered the period 2014-2020. The current evaluation reviews, updates, and complements the findings of the previous evaluation, focusing on the last three years of the Initiative (2020-2022) until its termination at the end of 2022.

### 5.1. RELEVANCE

#### Box 16. Summary conclusions

- The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative **aligned with the need to promote capacity building of hosting organisations**, as it provided timely and necessary support and expertise to partner organisations.
- It was also **well-aligned with the need for improvement in EU volunteering within the humanitarian aid field**, employing a comprehensive approach – the majority of organisations (77%, N=39) agreed or strongly agreed that the Initiative addressed persisting needs within the less-developed countries.
- It **addressed the central needs and concerns of participating volunteers and host organisations**, improved their transversal skills, built an understanding of the needs and challenges of the less-developed countries, and addressed the need to prepare for careers in international development.

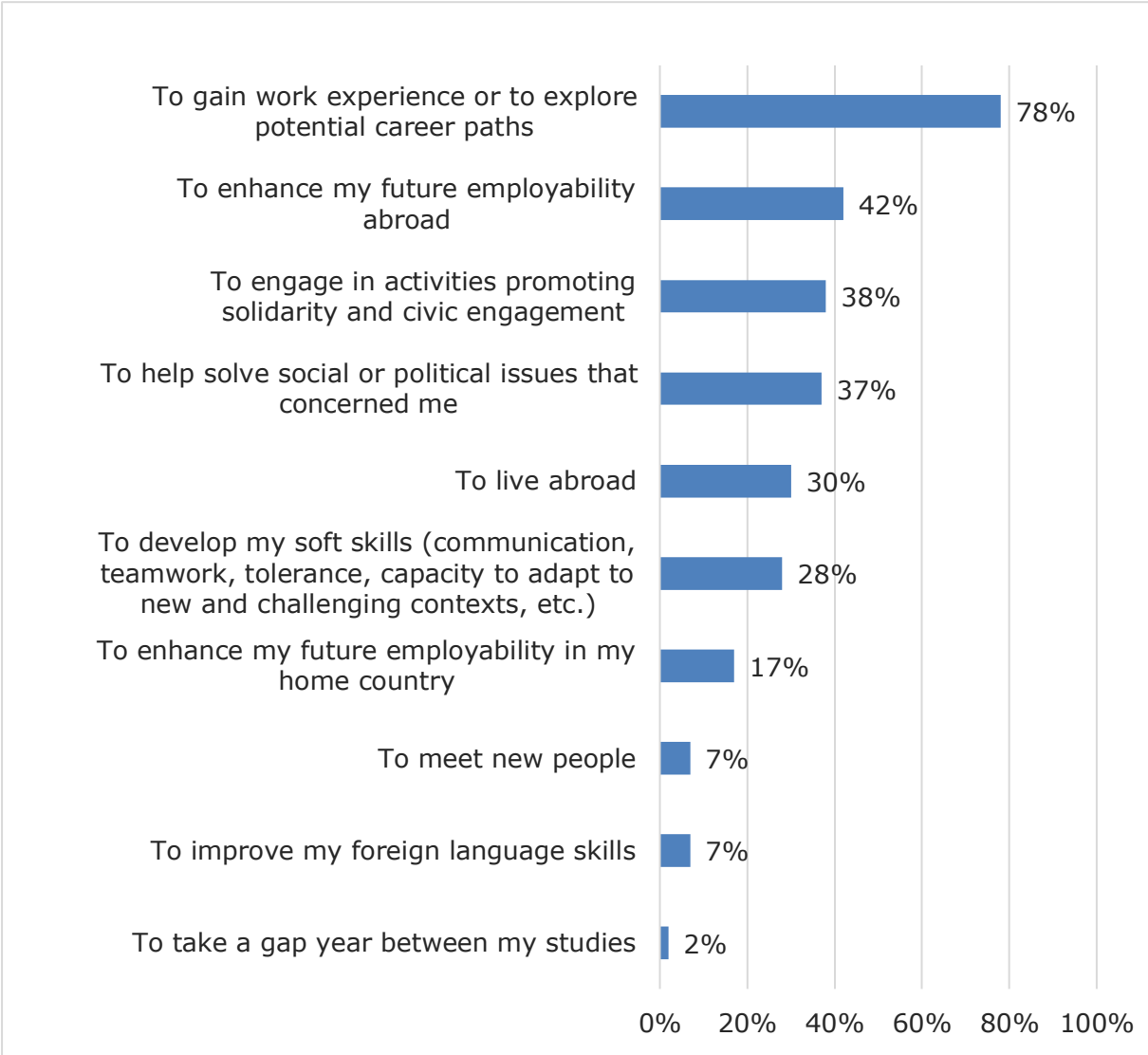
#### 5.1.1. INDIVIDUALS

**The 'ex-post' evaluation found that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had been responsive to the needs of the volunteers participating in the programme**, thereby promoting its objective of 'improving the skills, knowledge and competence of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid and the conditions of their engagement'.

**The evaluation found that the main reason for individuals to apply for the Initiative was to participate in training for humanitarian aid activities and to develop skills in this field, which was fulfilled during participation.** The survey programme for this evaluation shows that most individuals applied to gain work experience (78%, 78) and to improve their employability (42%, 42) (see figure below). Our interview programme also suggests that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was suitable for volunteers to develop their skills, as the activities engaged them in the field. Many organisations noted that former volunteers had started careers in development cooperation and civil society organisations<sup>169</sup>. Public consultations with 23 organisations involved in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative showed that organisations mostly believed that the Initiative improved opportunities for EU citizens to participate in humanitarian aid activities and operations.

<sup>169</sup> European Commission. "Civil Society." Neighbourhood and Enlargement. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/civil-society\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/civil-society_en).

**Figure 27. Volunteers’ primary reason for application to the Initiative**



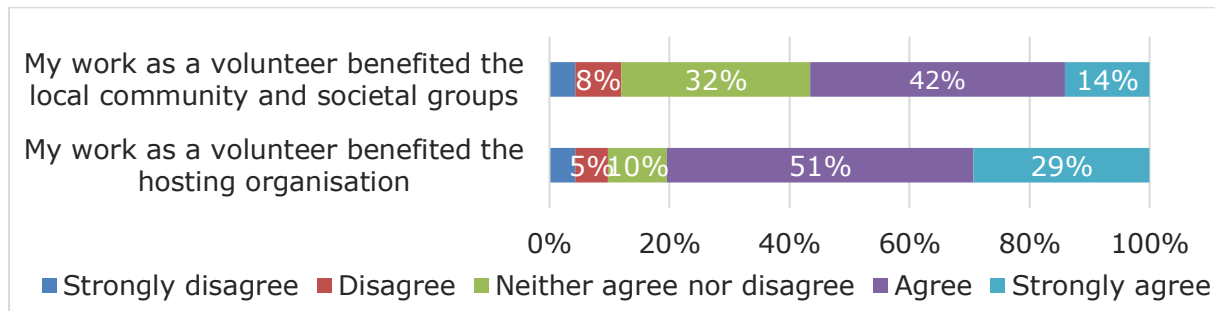
Source: survey of individual participants. Question 13 ‘What were the three most important reasons why you applied to become an EU Aid Volunteer? Check your top three reasons.’ (N=100)

**The results support the conclusion of the previous ‘ex-post’ evaluation in 2021 that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative increased the skills and knowledge of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid.** Our survey shows that 93% of organisations (25) felt that volunteers’ skills had improved, and 81% (79) of individuals agreed. Volunteers’ belief that the specific value of EU Aid Volunteers activities lay in the provision of high-quality training and professionalism was also evident from the survey results (see more details in section 5.5 on EU-added value). Although the ‘ex-post’ evaluation found that volunteers did not find some of the (core) training they received relevant, the current evaluation found limited evidence of this. In the survey of individual participants, 67% (53) were satisfied with the central training. In contrast, fewer participants were satisfied with mentoring support provided by either the hosting or sending organisation (42% and 45% of respondents were satisfied with these, respectively).

**The ‘ex-post’ evaluation and the most recent survey results indicate that the connection between hosting organisations’ capacity building and local**

**communities' increased resilience was clearer to organisations than to the volunteers** (see below). Many individuals were unsure if their work benefited the community. However, the involvement of volunteers in more administrative or clerical work, or even language barriers between them and the community, could have influenced their limited perceptions in this regard.

**Figure 28. Volunteers' perception of their work's contribution**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 36 'Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements about your volunteering experience:' (N=92)

Finally, the interview programme identified some potential areas of individual dissatisfaction with the level of volunteer compensation and housing. In the case of the former, some volunteers' dissatisfaction led them to suspend their activities or seek other employment<sup>170</sup>.

### 5.1.2. PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

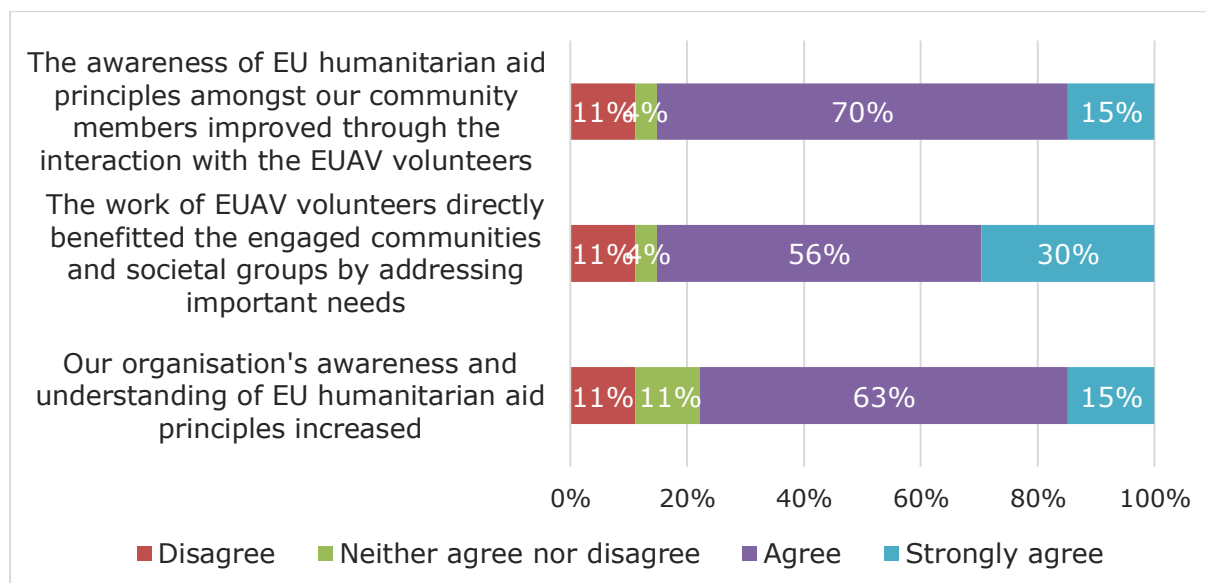
The conclusions of the 'ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative 2014-2020 on the relevance of the programme stated the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative adequately fitted the need to improve and increase EU capacity to provide humanitarian aid and to build the capacity of hosting organisations.

**The present evaluation found that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative supported hosting organisations' capacity building and fostered volunteering in third countries.** According to the survey, a substantial majority, 77% (30) of organisations, agree or strongly agree that the Initiative had successfully addressed persisting needs within the humanitarian aid sector, such as scarce capacities and lack of funding or visibility. According to public consultations, 83% (19) of organisations believed that their capacities have been increased. The interview programme revealed that the increased capacity was needed to address disasters in a timely and effective manner.

Most organisations believed that their work contributed to the lives of local communities. The interview programme suggests that participating organisations were primarily responding to current humanitarian needs in the areas of empowering marginalised communities, providing services to victims of violence (including gender-based violence), and disaster risk management.

<sup>170</sup> Country case study on Uganda

**Figure 29. Organisations’ perception of the impact of their activities**



Source: survey of organisations. Question 14 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organisation's experience hosting volunteers under the EU Aid Volunteers initiative?' (N=27)

**Organisations were also mostly satisfied with volunteers’ level of experience and appreciated that both senior and junior-level volunteers could be engaged.** In some cases, volunteers were able to support organisations in high-level activities such as risk and disaster management. In a few cases, organisations noted a skills mismatch, meaning they found volunteers insufficiently trained or experienced for the activities or missing key language skills<sup>171</sup>. Therefore, some organisations requested more support and funding. Additionally, the the capacity needs of the organisations could remain unmet after the volunteering experience ended, as both the interview programme and the ex-post evaluation suggest that there were gaps in the sustainability of volunteering.

**The support and flexibility of the programme design provided by the Initiative to participating organisations was criticised by the 'ex-post' evaluation.** More specifically, the evaluation stated that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was characterised by a lack of contingency planning and a rigidity of regulations that limited its capacity to adapt to changing contexts and hampered its effectiveness at times of crisis, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of our analysis for the period of 2021-2022 show that organisations acknowledged the flexibility offered by the Initiative in times of crisis but would have appreciated more support and guidance. Among organisations, 85% (33) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic affected their participation in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, and 68% (21) agreed or strongly agreed that the European Education and Culture Executive Agency was flexible and adaptable in accommodating project changes in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. However, only 39% (13) agreed that the support and guidance provided by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency during the pandemic was adequate.

**Respondents shared mixed views on the increased use of online volunteering during the pandemic,** with 39% (9) of organisations responding that it effectively supported them during the pandemic, suggesting that many respondents had no

<sup>171</sup> Interview programme

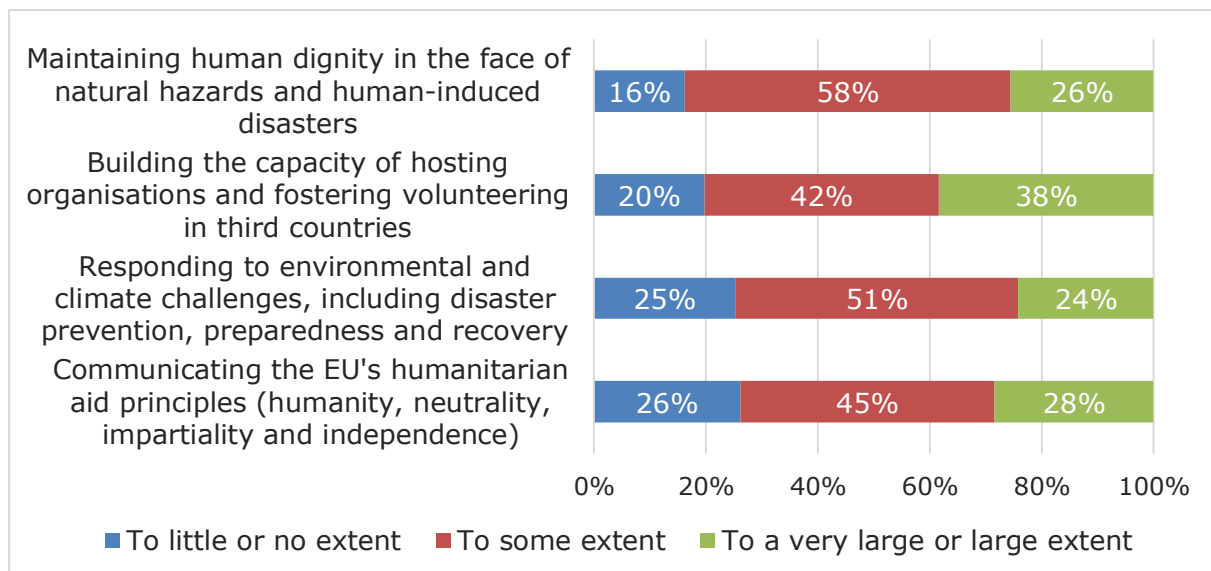
experience with it. During the interviews, those organisations that had hosted online volunteers described being satisfied with the experience and highlighted the support provided by volunteers in more technical areas such as translation, graphic design and proposal writing. Of the volunteers surveyed, 14% (14) stated that they had participated in online volunteering, with translation being the main area of activity (9).

### 5.1.3. INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

**The 'ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative found it to have been relevant for organisations and individuals, while noting some areas for improvement, specifically for third parties and the promotion of EU humanitarian principles beyond the direct beneficiaries.** In addition, the present evaluation found that the Initiative was also relevant to local governments' needs, specifically in disaster management, and was aligned with domestic initiatives<sup>172</sup>.

**The survey of individuals shows that the main objectives of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative mainly were aligned with societal needs, with some variation in their relevance** (see below). Although individuals felt that the objectives of preserving human dignity and building the capacity of host organisations were well aligned with societal needs, they were not entirely sure that these needs were satisfied, i.e., that the projects had increased community resilience or the visibility of the EU humanitarian principles (see figure below). As mentioned in the section above, this could have been influenced by the individuals' specific activities.

**Figure 30. Volunteers' assessment of EU Aid Volunteers objectives' alignment with societal needs**



Sources: survey of individual participants. Question 58 'The EU Aid Volunteers initiative had several horizontal priorities. In your view, to what extent did these priorities meet the needs and expectations of society?' (N=88)

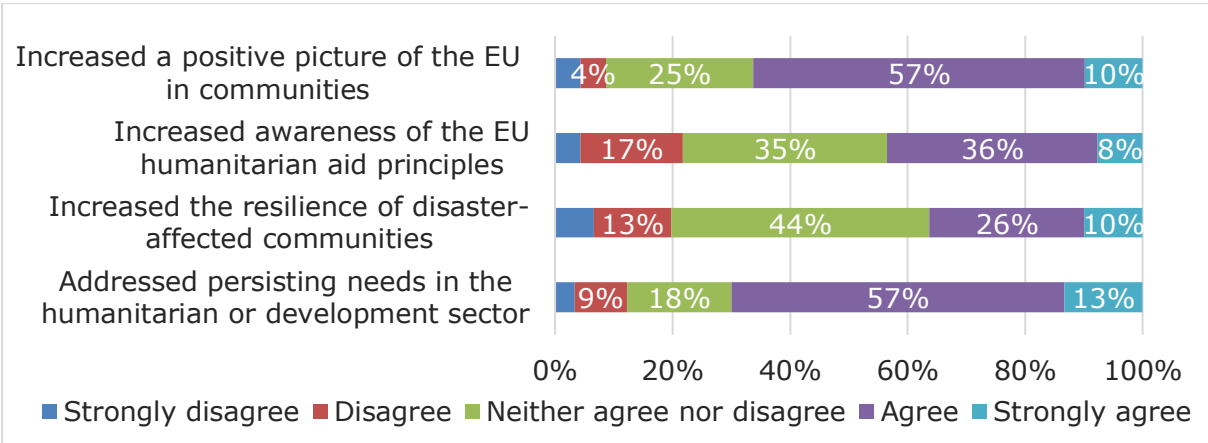
**85% (23) of organisations responding to the survey either agreed or strongly agreed that the work of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative directly benefited the communities and societal groups with which they engaged.** This high level of agreement suggests that the activities designed were suitable to support local communities. Public consultation with 23 organisations showed that 83% (19) agreed that the Initiative had increased the capacity of host organisations. The interview programme with

<sup>172</sup> Country case study on Uganda

organisations also suggests that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative promoted local volunteering activities for hosting organisations<sup>173</sup>.

As neither the current nor the 'ex-post' evaluations included field research, it is difficult to determine to which extent the EU Humanitarian Aid Principles engaged communities beyond the target beneficiaries. However, the interview programme suggests that most organisations had effective visibility strategies and communicated project results; in many cases, the visibility strategy was clear from the outset – although it is unclear to which extent the EU Humanitarian Aid Principles were included in them. As the 'ex-post' evaluation noted, the limited visibility and relevance of the principles to communities may have been due to the lack of a mechanism to ensure that they were promoted beyond the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's direct beneficiaries. Additionally, public consultation data showed that 70% (16) organisations agreed that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative created opportunities to promote EU Humanitarian Aid Principles, while two disagreed.

**Figure 31. Volunteers' perception of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's contribution to societal needs**



Sources: survey of individual participants. Question 58 'The EU Aid Volunteers initiative had several horizontal priorities. In your view, to what extent did these priorities meet the needs and expectations of society?' (N=88)

**85% (23) of organisations responding to the survey either agreed or strongly agreed that the work of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative directly benefited the communities and societal groups with which they engaged.** This high level of agreement suggests that the activities designed were suitable to support local communities. Public consultation with 23 organisations showed that 83% (19) agreed that the Initiative had increased the capacity of host organisations. The interview programme with organisations also suggests that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative promoted local volunteering activities for hosting organisations<sup>174</sup>.

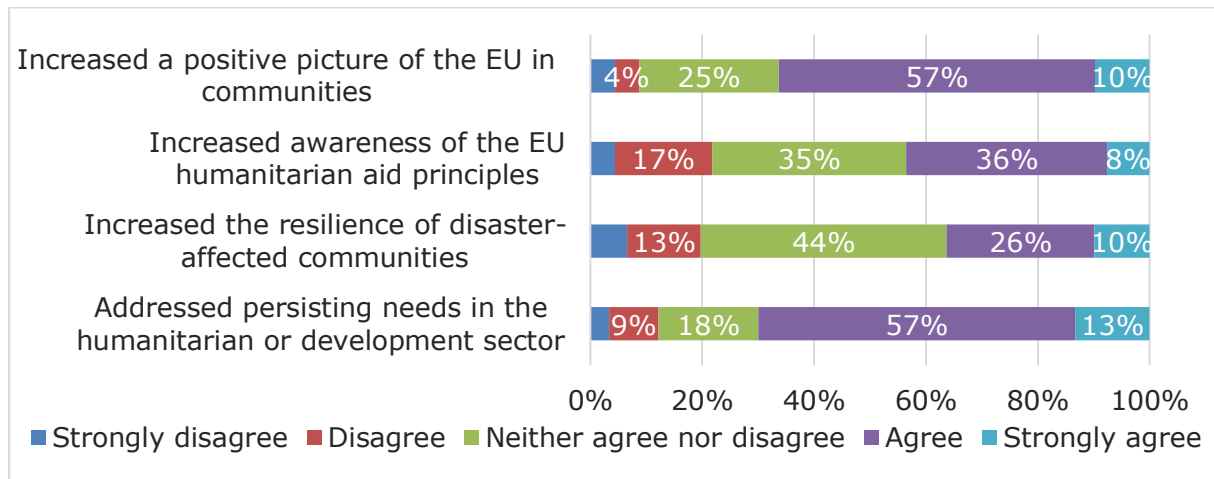
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<sup>173</sup> Country case studies on Uganda and Colombia

<sup>174</sup> Country case studies on Uganda and Colombia

showed that 70% (16) organisations agreed that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative created opportunities to promote EU Humanitarian Aid Principles, while two disagreed.

**Figure 32. Volunteers’ perception of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative’s contribution to societal needs**



Source: survey of individual participants. Question 37 'Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree that the EU Aid Volunteers initiative contributed to the following' (N = 92)

In the context of promoting **the EU’s humanitarian principles**, the establishing regulation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative foresaw that the programme should **contribute to strengthening the gender perspective in the EU’s humanitarian aid policy**. As outlined in the box below, the present evaluation finds that the Initiative has mainstreamed gender-sensitivity into its operations at different levels. For the complete horizontal case study, please refer to Annex 9.

**Box 17. The gender perspective in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative**

**The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative has mainstreamed a gender perspective into its humanitarian aid operations, in line with the EU’s wider commitment to gender-sensitive interventions.** Within organisations, **the Initiative reinforced a gender perspective through requirements and tools**, while EU Aid Volunteers with gender expertise provided added value to host organisations and contributed to the promotion of a gender perspective in humanitarian aid. Both volunteers and hosting organisations reported a high level of gender-sensitivity in their humanitarian interventions, while the majority of organisations found that their participation in the Initiative had strengthened their attention to the specific needs of women and men.

**Through its training activities, the Initiative also contributed to raising volunteers’ awareness of the specific needs of women in the context of humanitarian aid** and enabled them to deepen their understanding of gender dynamics in humanitarian aid interventions. Interviewed volunteers highlighted that although they had theoretical knowledge of gender issues, the practical exposure is what helped them to understand the factors that influence gender dynamics in different countries.

In terms of working with women’s groups and networks, engagement was primarily at the level of organisations that already worked with women’s organisations. However, the Initiative also encouraged further engagement by supporting projects with a specific focus on women’s leadership and participation.

## 5.2. COHERENCE

### Box 18. Summary conclusions

- The Initiative **was complementary to other EU programmes** (including the European Solidarity Corps, the former European Voluntary Service and Erasmus+) due to its wider geographical scope and specific types of activities.
- While the **Initiative's objectives were coherent and aligned with the EU's humanitarian agenda**, there was limited evidence of synergies with other EU activities in humanitarian aid.
- The Initiative was perceived as **coherent with national policies in host countries**, and informal links established at the time with some volunteer networks within EU Member States were observed.
- Stakeholders highly valued the Initiative for **strengthening local capacities**, particularly through training.

**The current evaluation finds that the Initiative was complementary to other EU programmes** offering volunteering activities (including the European Solidarity Corps, the former European Voluntary Service and Erasmus+) due to its wider geographical scope and specific types of activities. Like the European Solidarity Corps, the Initiative was concerned with solidarity but focused on humanitarian action in third countries. While the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ offered multilateral mobility opportunities within the EU and partner countries, the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative offered mobility in only one direction, from the EU to third countries and only to EU citizens or long-term residents.

**While the Initiative's objectives were coherent and aligned with the EU's humanitarian agenda, there was limited evidence of synergies with EU activities in the area of humanitarian aid.** One of the key challenges in this regard, as highlighted by the previous evaluation, is that security concerns prevented the deployment of volunteers to areas where EU humanitarian aid activities took place during disasters. The fact that volunteers could not be deployed to conflict zones<sup>175</sup>, internal concerns about deploying young volunteers to emergency situations<sup>176</sup>, and lengthy recruitment and deployment procedures limited the coherence of the Initiative with other humanitarian actions. In addition, as found by the previous evaluation, there was a lack of information among DG ECHO field offices or other EU Delegations about the Initiative's activities and limited interactions between them<sup>177</sup>. **However, the fact that the Initiative was very small compared to overall EU humanitarian aid - with EUR 141 million allocated to it for the period 2014-2020 (EU Regulation 375/2014) compared to the European Commission's humanitarian aid budget of EUR 13.5 billion for the same period<sup>178</sup> - also limits the potential observation of wider synergies.**

**A greater degree of coherence was found with organisations sending or hosting volunteers, as the Initiative professionalised their volunteer management and increased their access to a well-trained volunteer pool.** Host organisations particularly valued the capacity-building provided by the Initiative in areas such as security and risk, gender, communication and volunteer management, which helped them to adapt and strengthen their internal procedures<sup>179</sup>. In addition, interviewed hosting organisations indicated that by improving their visibility and capacities, the Initiative indirectly

<sup>175</sup> EUAV regulation 375/2014, Article 14.3.

<sup>176</sup> ADE (2021). "Ex-post" evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> DG ECHO Annual Activity Reports 2014-2020.

<sup>179</sup> See country case study on the EU Aid Volunteers initiative in Uganda.

contributed to better alignment and collaboration of hosting organisations<sup>180</sup>. Interviews with hosting organisations and national government officials in host countries indicate that **the Initiative was perceived as coherent with national policies** (e.g., in the areas of development and disaster management) and other programmes in the areas of resilience and disaster risk reduction.

**The previous evaluation found informal links with some volunteer networks within EU Member States.** In addition, the current survey of EU Aid Volunteers shows that 65% (53, N=82) had previous volunteering experience in the EU before applying to the Initiative. On the other hand, neither the previous nor the current evaluation found evidence of high-level coordination between the Initiative and major international volunteer networks, including United Nations Volunteers. While interviewees saw the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative as complementary and adding value compared to other international volunteering programmes offered by humanitarian organisations such as the United Nations, the Red Cross or Rotary, no direct synergies were identified.

### 5.3. EFFECTIVENESS

#### Box 19. Summary conclusions

- **The Initiative faced substantial challenges in achieving the targeted number of deployments.** While some of these challenges were addressed, the Initiative was affected severely by the movement restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result, the number of mobilities fell by tenfold in 2020.
- **Individual EU Aid Volunteers Initiative participants benefited from improved skills and professional development,** particularly in high-demand areas such as project management and security training before deployment. They were also able to practice and develop various transversal skills in the development context.
- **Organisations gained increased capacity in disaster risk reduction and resilience, increasing their visibility, credibility, and operational and communication capacity.**
- **The Initiative had positive effects on the supported communities,** especially those vulnerable to natural disasters, and the effects of migration. It provided important support to building resilience and local disaster management capabilities of populations in disaster-prone areas.
- **The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative increased the use of innovative approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic,** such as online volunteering, to ensure ongoing community engagement and support.

#### 5.3.1. OUTPUTS

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative fell short of meeting its original target of increasing Union citizens' opportunities to participate in humanitarian aid actions. The Initiative gained implementation speed between 2018 and 2019 but was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 with few volunteers trained and deployed (see table below). The calls for proposals published in April 2020 were cancelled entirely. The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had planned to deploy 4 175 volunteers, but only 1 192 volunteers were deployed during the 2014-2022 implementation period.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

**Table 9. EU Aid Volunteers Initiative outputs 2014-2022 implementation period**

Year	Volunteers trained		Volunteers deployed		Hosting and sending organisations participating*	
	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised
2014					100	88
2015	350		350			
2016	350	97	350	55	115	41
2017	550	178	550	162	110	179
2018	800	295	800	175	115	73
2019	1000	446	1 000	368	75	58
2020	1250	54	1 125	105	120	
2021				90		
2022		313		237		
<b>Total</b>	<b>4 300</b>	<b>1 383</b>	<b>4 175</b>	<b>1 192</b>	<b>635</b>	<b>439</b>

Source: EU (2023), 'MFF Performance Results Reports', retrieved from: [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29\\_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4e8f26d1-6604-496f-87c4-0b9a886adf29_en?filename=Core%20performance%20indicators%20%28new%29.pdf). Data on volunteers trained for 2020 and 2022 is from EACEA's Annual Activity Reports, 2020 and 2022.

\* This indicator reflects the work done in capacity building / technical assistance provided to organisations.

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative provided technical assistance and capacity building to strengthen the abilities of sending organisations and ensure that they complied with the standards and procedures set under the Initiative. In total, 439 organisations were selected during the period 2014-2019. The call for proposals published in 2020 was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations that aimed to participate in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative and deploy or host volunteers had to be certified as either sending or hosting organisations. An open call was published in 2015, allowing organisations to apply until 30 September 2020. By the end of 2020, 74 sending and 296 hosting organisations had been certified<sup>181</sup>.

### 5.3.2. RESULTS

**The EU Aid Volunteers surveyed for this evaluation mainly were highly satisfied with their experience, including the high quality of training and professional development opportunities.** Organisations also recognised the value of the training, though surveyed participants were more reserved about the quality of training provided by the host organisations. Moreover, the capacity of the programme to disseminate the EU humanitarian principles in the wider local communities was limited.

#### ***Improving the skills and knowledge of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid***

According to the 'ex-post' evaluation, the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative increased the skills and knowledge of volunteers in the area of humanitarian assistance. Volunteers acknowledged the high quality of their pre-deployment training while sending and hosting organisations commended the qualifications of the volunteers. The centralised training played a key role in fostering a strong sense of community among volunteers. However,

<sup>181</sup> Annual Report on the Implementation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative in 2020

despite its strengths, that training did not adequately address the practical realities of volunteer service. In particular, it did not sufficiently address the soft skills and cultural awareness that were essential for volunteers to be effective in the diverse environments they would encounter<sup>182</sup>.

**The current evaluation demonstrates similar results. Participants received high-quality training, with a clear majority confirming its effectiveness** (73%, 67, N=92). The Initiative was also successful in enriching participants' insights into the realities of the field, with most survey respondents confirming this outcome (84%, 76). Almost two-thirds of respondents indicated that the central training provided by EACEA was satisfactory (67%, 62). However, **the pre-deployment and in-country training provided by the sending and hosting organisations received a mixed response**, with 62% (57) expressing satisfaction with the former and less than half with the latter (47%, 43). Experiences of mentoring support also varied, with roughly equal proportions expressing satisfaction whether the support came from the sending (45%, 41) or the receiving organisation (42%, 39). Post-deployment debriefing by the sending organisation was rated positively by just over half of the participants (51%, 47).

**Deployments with a strong focus on professional development offered volunteers the opportunity to hone specific skills relevant to their role and the wider humanitarian sector** (75%, 83, N=93), although experiences varied depending on the host organisation. In addition, more than eight out of ten respondents agreed that the Initiative developed their skills to deliver humanitarian aid or development cooperation (81%, 74). A similar proportion acknowledged an increase in their knowledge of humanitarian principles (86%, 79). Furthermore, the experience was instrumental in building valuable personal relationships within the humanitarian and development sectors, with a significant number of respondents acknowledging this benefit (79%, 86).

### ***Building the capacity of hosting organisations and fostering volunteering in third countries***

The 'ex-post' evaluation concluded that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had increased the capacity of the participating organisations. However, the matching of volunteers' skills and profiles to the needs of host organisations was criticised for delays in the deployment process and mismatched expectations between volunteers and smaller host organisations. The delays were caused by the mismatch between the volunteers' skills and the needs of the organisations.

**The current evaluation confirms that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative has strengthened the capacity of both sending and hosting organisations, creating a group of trained volunteers who became better familiar with the modalities of humanitarian assistance.** The training programmes were commended for their quality and proved instrumental in equipping volunteers with essential skills and knowledge for their deployment and future humanitarian careers. The overall training was perceived as a valuable asset of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, distinguishing it from other volunteer programmes.

**Nine out of ten hosting organisations acknowledged that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had improved their capacity to deliver humanitarian aid to the local community** (89%, 24, N=27), while also recognising improvements in their ability to host and manage volunteers (93%, 25). The Initiative was credited for improving project management skills within organisations, with four out of five respondents confirming this benefit (79%, 31, N=39). This was closely followed by the desire for more opportunities

<sup>182</sup> ADE (2021). "Ex-post" evaluation of the EU AID Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020.

for training or capacity-building activities for organisations, mentioned by 63% (30, N=48) of organisations, suggesting a strong demand for strengthening organisational competencies and skills.

**In Uganda, the most frequently mentioned benefit was more knowledgeable host institution staff in disaster risk reduction with enhanced skills to formulate responsive and effective disaster risk reduction and resilience actions that have positively contributed to the reduction and prevention of disasters in disaster-prone communities<sup>183</sup>.** Other major benefits identified were enhanced visibility and transparency of the host organisations that enhanced collaboration opportunities with the EU and other international humanitarian agencies like UN Women, UNHCR, Red Cross, UNDP, and others. The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative certificate became proof of the host organisation's maturity for the humanitarian aid grant applications to international humanitarian assistance donors. The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative also enhanced the skills of the host organisations' staff in the formulation and drafting of Emergency Preparedness and Response Plans and mainstreamed disaster risk reduction activities in the host organisations' programmes.

### ***Communicating EU humanitarian aid principles***

The 'ex-post' evaluation concluded that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had effectively communicated the EU's humanitarian principles to both volunteers and the staff of organisations. Despite these efforts through the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, the wider dissemination of the EU humanitarian principles has been somewhat limited.

**This evaluation supports the finding that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative ensured EU humanitarian aid principles were communicated to the volunteers and to the staff of organisations.** Nine out of ten volunteers confirmed that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative increased their knowledge of humanitarian aid or development cooperation practices (87%, 80, N=92). Participating organisations also reported an increase in their awareness and understanding of EU humanitarian principles.

**The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's role in raising stakeholders' awareness of the EU humanitarian principles was met with mixed responses.** Organisations generally agreed with the Initiative's effective role in awareness-raising (87%, 34, N=39) and the awareness-raising effects among community members (85%, 23, N=27). Moreover, they noted that the Initiative increased the visibility of EU humanitarian action, with 84% (32, N=38) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. Furthermore, the organisations recognised the programme for creating opportunities to communicate the EU's humanitarian principles, with 90% (35, N=39) of participants acknowledging this impact.

**Volunteers, though, were less eager to confirm the programme's effectiveness in raising awareness of the EU humanitarian aid principles,** with 44% (40, N=92) compared to 35% who remained neutral. However, volunteers agreed that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative positively represented the European Union within affected communities (66%, N=92). The case study of Uganda revealed that T-shirts with EU logos were printed and distributed among different stakeholders to promote EU support visibility. This was the most common activity promoting the EU by the host organisations. Other activities included mentions of EU support during radio programmes, pull-up banners, jerseys with EU logos, and newsletters. In Colombia, one of the organisations successfully presented a case to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, which involved 102 women who were victims of sexual violence during the armed conflict<sup>184</sup>. The contributions of a volunteer

<sup>183</sup> Country case study on Uganda

<sup>184</sup> Country case study on Colombia

who documented the process with the victims through audiovisual and graphic elements were crucial in achieving this. They also noted that volunteers with a high level of literacy in multiple languages, such as English and French, helped effectively communicate this organisation's actions to stakeholders in other countries.

### 5.3.3. IMPACTS

**The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative demonstrated sustainable impact.** According to the 'ex-post' evaluation, the Initiative had several lasting effects. The vast majority of the surveyed volunteers stated that following their experience with the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, they worked, intended to work or volunteered in the humanitarian aid field. The programme also increased, even if marginally, the capacity of the EU to provide humanitarian aid by reaching new organisations and promoting new partnerships between organisations. At the same time, the previous evaluation reported that the Initiative exposed gaps, such as the lack of a contingency plan and an inflexible design during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result was a fragmented and delayed response to the pandemic.

**The current evaluation also concludes that organisations continued to engage in similar volunteering activities, indicating a lasting impact beyond the direct involvement in the Initiative** (77%, 30, N=39). The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative also increased the volunteers' interest in pursuing a career in humanitarian aid or development cooperation, as indicated by 86% (79, N=92) respondents. This intention was realised in practice as 42% (40, N=96) of former EU Aid Volunteers were working in the field of humanitarian aid at the time of the survey, while 39% (37) expressed their intention to do so. Similarly, a majority of 53% (51) have continued their work in the field of development cooperation and 31% (30) intended to start working in this field.

**The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative also strengthened the EU's capacity to deliver humanitarian aid, a majority of organisations stated** (72%, 28, N=39). In addition, a large majority confirmed that the Initiative had stimulated the creation of lasting partnerships with other organisations (77%, 30) and expanded their international networks (72%, 28). Indeed, more than half of the surveyed organisations were selected as hosting or sending organisations for the European Solidarity Corps humanitarian aid strand.

**The response to the COVID-19 pandemic varied.** Organisations recognised the European Education and Culture Executive Agency's flexibility in accommodating necessary project changes (68%, 21, N=31). Half of them were positive about the support and adaptations provided by the agency, including issuing clear guidelines to ensure the safety of volunteers. For example, the thematic focus of the project activities changed for about a quarter of the participants. However, the majority of organisations reported that not all participating organisations could take part in their project as intended (58%, 19, N=33) and the same number reported that their projects had been postponed. The most common change for participating organisations was the need to move planned activities online (4%, 14, N=34) which was not perceived as a fully adequate substitute for onsite volunteering.

## 5.4. EFFICIENCY

### Box 20. Summary conclusions

Overall the budget, budget execution and programme management were efficient given the context within which the programme was implemented, with improvements to be made in the measurement of outputs and outcomes.

- **Funding** was sufficient as the budget spent was only around 76% of all available funds due in large part to the delays in starting up the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative and delays towards the end of the outbreak of COVID-19. Yet, a large minority of participants gave negative feedback regarding the level of programme funding.
- **Implementation:** The actual expenditures for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative were consistent with the share of the budget allocation specified in Regulation 375/2014. However, the rationale behind the budget allocation in relation to expected activities and outcomes was unclear. Delays in starting up the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative and COVID-19 contributed to a low implementation rate of only 29%.
- **Performance Management:** The actual costs per organisation engaged in interventions have been 10% lower than anticipated in the budget, which indicates some degree of cost-effectiveness. However, limited information on the outputs and outcomes of activities makes it difficult to reach a clear conclusion on their overall cost-effectiveness.

#### 5.4.1. FUNDING

**Funding for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was overall sufficient.** Despite the prolonged availability of budgets well into 2021 and 2022 to compensate for disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, 24% of the budget remained unused at the end of 2022 when the Initiative was terminated. Compared to the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps within the current European Solidarity Corps, the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had a proportionately larger budget (218% of the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps) but also a larger target number of deployments (214%, or 4 175 deployments vs. 1 955 deployments) which seems appropriate.

**However, the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative did not only fail to meet its spending targets but also its participant goals.** By the end of 2022, funding was secured for 1 192 deployments, equating to 29% of the initial goal. Thus, there are doubts that the available funding would have been realistic for the Initiative to achieve its goals. This indicates that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative allocated 76% of its budget towards realising 29% of its objectives. Extrapolating this, fulfilling 100% of the targets would have likely necessitated a much higher budget.

**Participants gave marginally positive feedback on the financial compensation for participating in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative.** A short majority of them, 56% (N=91), agreed or strongly agreed that the financial support received was sufficient to cover their participation costs. This is largely in line with previous evaluation findings<sup>185</sup>. While a majority felt the financial support was adequate, and the benefits outweighed the costs, a significant proportion may have had different experiences. Approximately 32% of survey respondents stated that financial support was not enough for them to sustain themselves. This seemed to be especially the case in countries and urban areas with higher costs of living. Some participants have dropped out due to insufficient financing. However, a majority of participants, 62% (N=91), agreed that the benefits they gained from their involvement in the Initiative outweighed the costs (e.g. resources expended or commitment made).

<sup>185</sup> ADE (2021), "Ex-post" evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020, retrieved from: [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/euav\\_ex\\_post\\_evaluation\\_study\\_ade\\_final\\_report\\_-\\_volume\\_1\\_-\\_report.pdf](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/euav_ex_post_evaluation_study_ade_final_report_-_volume_1_-_report.pdf)

The 'ex-post' evaluation found that the actual average cost of deploying a volunteer for a month was € 3 180. This is slightly lower than the budgeted amount of € 3 279, making it seem sufficient. When compared to the costs of deploying a UN volunteer in 2019, the average pro forma costs were significantly higher at about € 4 360 for International UN volunteers and € 3 220 for International Youth UN volunteers. This comparison suggests that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's deployment costs were competitive, particularly when considering the International Youth UN volunteers. However, a concern was the volatility of project costs, where the actual cost of deploying volunteers varied from around € 2 500 to € 4 100 a month, depending on the projects. Several factors might explain differences in real costs per deployment not taken into account by unit costs:

- Geographical locations and differences in purchasing power
- Quality of volunteering experience and/or level of outputs and outcomes achieved
- Seasonal variations in costs of living in specific areas such as tourism hotspots

For instance, an organisation complained that unit costs did not account for the seasonality of costs in areas also popular with tourism. They explained that while funding would have been enough in 8 out of 12 months, they could not provide flights or accommodation in summer when prices rose.

**It was not possible to assess whether the allocation of expenditures for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was consistent with the allocation specified in Regulation 375/2014** on the three thematic priorities beyond the assessment done by the 'ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020<sup>186</sup>. There is, however, little divergence between the overall budget spent between the publication date of the previous evaluation and the latest overall budget data available, which indicates that there was little room for the programme to significantly deviate from the budget allocation in terms of percentages. Thus, it is assumed that the allocation of expenditures for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was consistent with the allocation specified in Regulation 375/2014 on the three thematic priorities.

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative did not introduce results-based budgeting or tailor the budget to the three operational objectives under thematic priorities in the final year of its running. **Consequently, the share of the total budget to be apportioned was also not linked with expected outcomes (which remained unobserved) or activity levels.**

**The budget allocation rationale for expected activities and outcomes was imprecise.** Annual Work Programmes (2014-2020) lacked specific activity levels for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative. The seven Annual Work Programmes outlined results without detail, primarily as outputs, not outcomes, complicating budget-outcome alignment assessment<sup>187</sup>.

#### 5.4.2. ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

**Participation in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was somewhat burdensome for volunteers and organisations alike.** A strong minority of participants (43%, N=91) claimed that their involvement in the Initiative generated little paperwork from their side, yet every third participant disagreed (34% N=91).

<sup>186</sup> ADE (2021), "Ex-post" evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020, retrieved from: [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/euav\\_ex\\_post\\_evaluation\\_study\\_ade\\_final\\_report\\_-\\_volume\\_1\\_-\\_report.pdf](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/euav_ex_post_evaluation_study_ade_final_report_-_volume_1_-_report.pdf)

<sup>187</sup> EU Aid Volunteers Initiative Annual Work Programmes (2014-2020)

While a slight majority (52%, N=91) of participants found the time lag between application and deployment (or the start of online volunteering) reasonable, every third participant disagreed. The frustration likely stemmed from security-driven restrictions on volunteer deployment, which led to a relatively long gap between the planning and deployment of volunteers and further limited their involvement in humanitarian interventions<sup>188</sup>. The delay between request and deployment often meant that organisations' needs had changed, and the volunteers had to fill a role that had not been originally planned. This suggests that the process could have been streamlined or made more transparent to reduce frustration, as well as by improving communication about these restrictions and their impact on the deployment timeline, providing more realistic estimation or more frequent updates on the status and reasons for delay. Furthermore, the issue of volunteers having to fill roles not originally planned due to changes in hosting organisations' needs indicated a lack of flexibility in the deployment process. This could have potentially been mitigated by allowing more flexibility or improving direct communication between hosting organisations and volunteers about changing needs.

Despite these problems, the Initiative was generally well-received, with a majority of participating organisations expressing satisfaction. Despite encountering issues with applications and deployment, 60% (N=91) of the participating organisations reported satisfaction with the support they received. This indicates that the Initiative's support system was effective for a significant portion of the participating organisations. However, there was room for improvement as 20% of the participating organisations were indifferent, suggesting that their needs may not have been fully met.

### 5.4.3. EFFICIENCY OF PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

**The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative has been cost-effective compared to similar programmes, but not compared to the European Solidarity Corps humanitarian aid strand.** Elements of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, such as deployments, were on average more costly than for the European Solidarity Corps' humanitarian aid strand. The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, with its higher training requirements and on average longer deployments incurred higher costs, resulting in a cost of €49 168.47 per participant.

Similarly, the cost-effectiveness per organisation for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative is €127 102.80. This means that as an organisation gets bigger (with more participants), the costs (like administrative overhead, infrastructure, and support services) do not increase at the same rate. So, even if an organisation doubles in size, the costs do not necessarily double. This can make larger organisations seem more cost-effective.

**The €49 168.47 cost per participant in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative is commensurate with those of comparable programmes.** For instance, the International UN Youth Volunteers had a cost of approximately €44 654 per volunteer in 2021. This means that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was slightly less cost-effective per participant than the International UN Youth Volunteers and that the International UN Youth Volunteers were marginally more cost-effective on a per-participant basis<sup>189</sup>.

Additionally as mentioned in the section on funding, the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's cost per deployed participant did vary greatly in practice. The large cost variations highlight a potential weakness in the call for proposals process. The lack of explicit linkage between

<sup>188</sup> ADE (2021), "Ex-post" evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020, retrieved from: [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/euav\\_ex\\_post\\_evaluation\\_study\\_ade\\_final\\_report\\_-\\_volume\\_1\\_-\\_report.pdf](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/euav_ex_post_evaluation_study_ade_final_report_-_volume_1_-_report.pdf)

<sup>189</sup> UN (2021), 2021 Proforma cost table, retrieved from: <https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/2021%20Proforma%20Costs%20for%20international%20and%20national%20UN%20Volunteers.pdf>

the budget and the number, duration, outcomes and impacts of volunteers' deployment could have led to inefficiencies. Establishing a more direct connection between these factors would have potentially contributed to a more cost-effective Initiative.

#### 5.4.4. PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND MONITORING (RACER CRITERIA)

To evaluate the efficiency of performance measurement and monitoring, this study looks at three main indicators. First, the study uses the RACER (relevant, accepted, credible, easy to monitor, robust) criterion, which is a set of standards to ensure that the Initiative has been measuring the right things in the right way in the Better Regulation Toolbox of the European Commission. Second, the efficiency of tools and methods for tracking progress is measured by checking whether they are providing accurate and timely information. Lastly, the study checks whether what the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative has measured aligned with what it initially set out to measure in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. This way, it is ensured that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was on the right track and making the most efficient use of its resources.

Regarding **relevance**, the indicators used by the Commission for monitoring were deemed only partially relevant and not comprehensive. Monitoring data available through the MFF Results Report were more compliance-focused, assessing the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's budget at an action level rather than at any type of outcome level with the exception of 2015. Performance therefore cannot clearly be linked to the five stated objectives of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative.

In terms of **credibility**, the performance management of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative faced serious issues due to the absence of automated data collection processes. Manual data entry is prone to human error, which can lead to inaccurate data. This resulted in superficial annual monitoring reports, with gaps in indicators and a lack of consistency in reporting. As the programme grew, manual data collection became increasingly difficult to scale, limiting the timeliness of data analysis and subsequent decision-making.

On the upside, the indicators used by the Commission for performance management were few and therefore **easy to monitor** as they were tied to directly measurable outputs. This made it easier to collect the data in theory.

Lastly, missing data at the finalisation stage had a negative impact on the **robustness** of performance management. Reliable data is crucial for identifying areas for improvement for the successor programme. Despite recommendations in the 'ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative to include outcome-related indicators, the overall lack of regular monitoring of outcome and impact-related indicators cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's performance. Outcome and impact indicators would have been essential to understand the long-term effects and the real impact of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's activities on the communities it served.

## 5.5. EU ADDED VALUE

### Box 21. Summary conclusions

- The Initiative contributed to **common standards for humanitarian aid volunteering** across the EU Member States.
- The **participating organisations' capacity to train and host international volunteers was enhanced.**

- The programme **enhanced the deployment of volunteers** by leveraging the EU's global presence.
- The involvement of **well-trained volunteers** was a distinct EU-added value that also enhanced the operational capacities of the organisations involved in humanitarian assistance.
- The Initiative **enabled local organisations to scale up their operations and improve their effectiveness in humanitarian aid delivery** by enhancing local capacities, volunteer management, and the ability to undertake larger projects.
- The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative played a significant role in **developing international collaboration and networks**.

### 5.5.1.SCOPE AND VOLUME EFFECTS

The 'ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative 2014-2020 concluded that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had **demonstrated EU added value by contributing to centralising and standardising systems and processes, which is more difficult to accomplish by individual EU Member States**. Indeed, our survey results for the period of 2021-2022 complement and confirm this finding. A significant majority, 87% of respondents (33 organisations), agreed or strongly agreed that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative effectively introduced common standards for humanitarian aid volunteering across the EU. This indicates a strong consensus that the Initiative was successful in establishing consistent and recognised benchmarks in this field, which is essential for the quality and efficiency of EU humanitarian aid volunteering.

Additionally, the evaluation found that there was a strong agreement, with 82% (31), that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had **leveraged the EU's global presence to facilitate the deployment of volunteers**. This high level of agreement suggests that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was perceived as successfully utilising the EU's extensive humanitarian and logistical network to enhance volunteer deployment in humanitarian aid actions, something that could not be matched by the efforts of individual member states alone.

Additionally, the previous evaluation concluded that **the emphasis on capacity building of organisations was an EU-added value compared to other schemes** that exclusively focused on deployments. Our findings for 2021-2022 confirm this conclusion. A substantial majority, 89% of our respondents (24 organisations), agree or strongly agree that the Initiative had **enhanced their organisation's capacity to provide humanitarian aid**. At the same time, as much as 93% (25 organisations) either agreed or strongly agreed that the Initiative improved their **capacity to host and manage volunteers**. Additionally, 74% (28 organisations) believed that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had increased their **capacity to undertake larger projects, with 80% (31 organisations), agreeing on the Initiative's contribution to improving project management skills. This underlines the capacity-building effect of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative for the participating organisations. This enabled them to scale up their operations and improve their effectiveness in humanitarian aid delivery by enhancing local aid capacities, volunteer management, and the ability to undertake larger projects**. This added value was important for enhancing the impact of EU humanitarian aid volunteering.

Additionally, **the engaged communities experienced improvements due to the Initiative**. 85% (23) of organisations and 56% (52) of volunteers surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that their work benefited the local communities and societal groups. Based on the results of **our country-level case studies in Uganda and Colombia**, the

communities experienced improvements in several areas due to the Initiative: enhanced skills in fund mobilisation and volunteer programme management, improved success in acquiring grants for promoting income generation in disaster-affected areas, development and utilisation of strengthened local disaster management capabilities.

### 5.5.2. PROCESS AND INNOVATION

The 'ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative for the period 2014-2020 **concluded that the quality and standards of the volunteer training, facilitated by the Commission's centralised approach and existing expertise**, were widely regarded as providing added value compared to other volunteering schemes available.

**Providing high-quality training to volunteers was seen as a distinctive added value of the Initiative:** 75% (67) of volunteers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Additionally, beyond the general approval of the training quality as an added value, a substantial portion of volunteers felt that their practical skills in humanitarian aid were enhanced due to participation in the Initiative: 80% (74) either agreed or strongly agreed that the Initiative contributed to the development of their skills in providing humanitarian aid or development cooperation.

Our findings on added value extend beyond individual benefits to organisational impacts. The **involvement of trained volunteers was not only beneficial at an individual level but also contributed to enhancing the operational capacities of the organisations involved in humanitarian assistance**. 85% of the organisations (23) either agreed or strongly agreed that their capacity to provide humanitarian assistance improved through the hosting of EU Aid Volunteers. The data suggests that the Initiative was well-received and effective in its goals related to training quality, skill development, and organisational capacity in humanitarian aid and development efforts.

### 5.5.3. NETWORK EFFECTS

The 'ex-post' evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative for the period 2014-2020 **concluded that by encouraging transnational partnerships whose application had extended beyond the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's network**, the Initiative had demonstrated significant EU added value.

Our results align with the original finding, showing that **the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative facilitated the establishment and strengthening of local and international networks**. A significant proportion, 77% of respondents (30 organisations), agreed or strongly agreed that the Initiative helped in building new partnerships that continued beyond the scope of specific projects. Furthermore, our country-level case studies of Uganda and Colombia illustrate that leveraging skills and knowledge acquired through **the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative had helped local organisations not only secure international partnerships but also funding**.

Additionally, our survey results revealed that a majority, 65% of respondents (24 organisations), agreed or strongly agreed that the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative **had improved the coordination of international multi-stakeholder projects**. This reflects a positive perception of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative's role in fostering better cooperation and coordination among various entities involved in humanitarian efforts. A majority, 72% (28), agreed or strongly agreed that **their international network expanded due to participation in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative**, which highlights the Initiative's role in broadening global connections and collaborations.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS OF THE EVALUATION OF THE EU AID VOLUNTEERS INITIATIVE**

### **6.1. CONCLUSIONS ON THE RELEVANCE OF THE INITIATIVE**

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative responded to the need to support the capacity building of host organisations and the promotion of volunteering in third countries. By providing timely support and expertise to partner organisations, the Initiative demonstrated its relevance and responsiveness to organisational needs. This focus also extended to improving EU volunteering in the humanitarian aid field, which was underlined by positive feedback from organisations on the holistic approach of the Initiative. The evaluation found that while participating organisations appreciated the flexibility offered by the Initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic, more support and guidance could have been provided.

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative was responsive to the needs of the volunteers participating in the Initiative and aligned with the objective of improving the skills, knowledge and competence of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid and the conditions of their engagement. It enhanced the transversal skills of volunteers, built a solid understanding of the needs and challenges in third countries and effectively prepared participants for careers in international development.

With regard to the Initiative's objective to contribute to strengthening the gender perspective in EU humanitarian aid policy, the evaluation concludes that the Initiative has mainstreamed a gender perspective into its humanitarian aid operations, in line with the EU's wider commitment to gender-sensitive interventions. In terms of working with women's groups and networks, engagement took place primarily at the level of organisations already working with women's organisations. However, the Initiative also encouraged further engagement by supporting projects with a specific focus on women's leadership and participation.

### **6.2. CONCLUSIONS ON THE COHERENCE OF THE INITIATIVE**

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative demonstrated coherence with the strategic priorities of the European Union, particularly in the field of humanitarian aid. It effectively complemented other EU programmes, including the European Solidarity Corps, the former European Voluntary Service and Erasmus+, through its wider geographical scope and specific types of activities. However, while the Initiative's objectives were coherent and well aligned with the EU's humanitarian agenda, there was limited evidence of synergies with other EU humanitarian activities. The fact that the Initiative was very small compared to overall EU humanitarian aid limited the potential observation of wider synergies.

A greater degree of coherence was found with organisations sending or hosting volunteers, as the Initiative professionalised their volunteer management and increased their access to a well-trained volunteer pool. Stakeholders highly appreciated the role of the Initiative in strengthening local capacities, in particular through targeted training programmes. This focus on capacity building not only addressed immediate needs, but also contributed to the long-term development of hosting organisations and communities. The Initiative was perceived to be coherent with national policies in host countries and established informal links with some volunteer networks within EU Member States.

### **6.3. CONCLUSIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INITIATIVE**

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative fell short of meeting its objective of increasing the opportunities for EU citizens to participate in humanitarian aid operations. In this context, a key challenge for the implementation of the Initiative was the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely affected the targeted number of deployments, with a tenfold decrease in mobility in 2020 due to movement restrictions.

The Initiative effectively supported the skills and professional development of volunteers. In particular, it enhanced their skills in areas such as project management. In addition, participants were able to practice and develop cross-cutting skills in the development context, which contributed to their overall professional growth and readiness for future humanitarian work.

It also strengthened the capacity of participating organisations, particularly in the area of disaster risk reduction and resilience, and contributed to increased visibility, credibility, operational and communication skills. At the community level, the Initiative had a positive impact, particularly in areas vulnerable to natural disasters and uncontrolled migration waves, where it provided support for building resilience and local disaster management capacities.

### **6.4. CONCLUSIONS ON THE EFFICIENCY OF THE INITIATIVE**

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative overall demonstrated efficiency in its operations. The budget execution and overall programme management were efficient, considering the context within which the Initiative was implemented.

Funding for the Initiative was sufficient, with around 76% of available funds spent. This underutilisation was largely due to delays in starting up the Initiative and further delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite sufficient funding, a large minority of volunteers expressed dissatisfaction with the level of funding received.

The actual expenditures for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative were consistent with the budget allocation specified in Regulation 375/2014. However, the rationale behind the budget allocation in relation to expected activities and outcomes was unclear. Delays in the Initiative's start and the impact of COVID-19 contributed to a low implementation rate of only 29%.

Performance management within the Initiative showed some degree of cost-effectiveness, with actual costs per organisation engaged in interventions having been 10% lower than anticipated. However, the limited information on the outputs and outcomes of activities makes it challenging to draw definitive conclusions about overall cost-effectiveness.

### **6.5. CONCLUSIONS ON EU-ADDED VALUE OF THE INITIATIVE**

The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative provided EU-added value by contributing to common standards for humanitarian aid volunteering across EU Member States. The Initiative leveraged the EU's global presence to enhance the deployment of volunteers, providing a platform for individuals to engage in meaningful humanitarian aid activities in third countries.

Participating organisations experienced capacity enhancements in their ability to train and host international volunteers. This improved capacity not only benefited the volunteers but

also strengthened the operational capabilities of the organisations involved, enabling them to undertake larger and more complex projects. The involvement of well-trained volunteers contributed to improving operational capacities of the organisations engaged in humanitarian assistance. The EU Aid Volunteers Initiative also fostered local and international collaboration and the development of networks, which facilitated knowledge sharing, collaborative initiatives, and long-term partnerships

## **ANNEXES**

**Annex 1: Synthesis of European Solidarity Corps national implementation reports**

**Annex 2: Factual summary report of the public consultation**

**Annex 3: Stakeholder consultation synopsis report**

**Annex 4: Interview questionnaires**

**Annex 5: Survey questionnaires**

**Annex 6: Survey results and datasets**

**Annex 7: Counterfactual analysis of the European Solidarity Corps programme**

**Annex 8: Social media analysis of the European Solidarity Corps programme**

**Annex 9: Horizontal case studies**

**Annex 10: Tender specifications**

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