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END AND MIDTERM EVALUATION EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

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I. Executive summary

This national report contributes to the final evaluation of Erasmus+ Youth in Action volunteering actions (2014-2017), the European Solidarity Corps programme (2018-2020) and the interim evaluation of the current European Solidarity Corps programme (2021-2027). The evaluation report draws on several sources, including several studies.

The report presents results for each of the **five evaluation criteria** i.e. effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and European added value. For each, a thought through selection of the guiding questions from the guidance note for national reports on the implementation and impact of Erasmus+ of the European Commission is being addressed.

The programme demonstrates to be **effective** in realising volunteering opportunities and solidarity activities for young people, and support mechanisms and networking activities for the organisations involved. It is a value-based programme that offers learning experiences while also strengthening civil society. Notably, the programme proves to be effective in reaching out to YPFO. The sustained efforts to make the programme **more inclusive** are bearing fruit. At the level of participants, ESC activities are valued for stimulating the self-development of young people and boosting solidarity, while for organisations, international volunteers make a valuable contribution to their daily operation while also adding a European dimension.

When it comes to **efficiency**, the image is more mixed. A number of positive elements are highlighted, such as the personalised support offered by the NA and the Quality Label. However, the increasing administrative burden and malfunctioning tools are considered a major obstacle, negatively affecting performance indicators, the perception of the EU programmes and well-being of beneficiaries and NA staff.

Affecting both effectiveness and efficiency is the **size of the budget**, which is not sufficient for the increasing demand. This hinders the ESC from growing and reaching its full potential. At the level of awarded projects, there are also concerns about the adequacy of the awarded grants for beneficiaries.

Stakeholders consider European Solidarity Corps objectives highly **relevant**. ESC projects include various activities that contribute to social change such as youth empowerment and inclusion. Nevertheless, the learning dimension of volunteers and young people is prioritised.

Coherence with other national programmes does not play a strong role, since these programmes in the youth field have virtually disappeared due to the success of EU youth programmes including the ESC. Synergies are looked for with local and regional authorities for solidarity projects. The Bel'J programme is the only complementary initiative. Coherence with other European programmes is however considered important.

Finally, there is also evidence for the **European added value** of the European Solidarity Corps. At the governance level, the presence of a distinct programme dedicated at supporting young people and the youth field is important in terms of recognition of non-formal, value-based learning. At the operational level, the programme's opportunities for

cooperation with third countries not associated to the programme are a clear added value, underpinning mutual international solidarity and exchange.

To summarise, the answers to the standard questions indicate that **the European Solidarity Corps** reaches its objectives in Flanders, and that there is clearly space for further development and expansion. Elements for improvement and needs for adjustment are addressed in the final section of this report, under 'recommendations for the future'.

Recommendations focus on four key areas: the programme's position and potential, the quality of its offer, the administrative workload, and inclusion measures.

II. Introduction

The end-evaluation of the Erasmus + Youth in Action 2014-2017 volunteering actions and the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and the mid-term evaluation of the current ESC programme give a clear insight in the role of the EU Youth programmes in Flanders and how they impact the lives of young people and contribute to youth work development and youth policy.

Before getting into the details of the report, we would like to highlight some **priority issues** to take forward in the second half of ESC 2021-2027 and the new programming period 2028-2034. These constitute a common thread throughout this report.

First, the European Solidarity Corps programme and its predecessor are being highly valued as a **programme for and by young people** that puts volunteering and solidarity central. Therefore, the ESC should prioritise its adaptation to the working methods and needs of young people and the youth field. This youth-oriented focus should be safeguarded at all levels of programme management, from the practical level (e.g. application procedures that are more accessible to young people) to the policy level (retaining a separate youth programme, indirectly managed by a youth NA).

Second, the ESC is an adequate, relevant response to young people's need for **civic engagement opportunities** in different shapes. Volunteering has been a cornerstone of the EU Youth Programmes since their inception and has evolved into an action including a variety of volunteering formats. The introduction of local opportunities (the solidarity projects) has also been embraced, which is reflected in a steep rise in solidarity projects. This diversification is seen as a strength of the programme as it makes it more accessible for all youngsters. Importantly, more than in participant numbers, the impact of these different forms of engagement is reflected in its transformative effect on the young people involved and their communities.

Third, **networking (NET) and training (TEC) activities** are instrumental in creating the necessary circumstances for the development and implementation of high-impact volunteering and solidarity activities. Community activities at national and transnational level strengthen organisations' capacities and networks and deepen the impact of solidarity corps participants' experiences.

Finally, while this report highlights the strong **inclusion** record of ESC in reaching out to young people with fewer opportunities in the national context of Flanders, sustained efforts and structural adjustments are needed to keep mobility opportunities accessible to many instead of a privilege for some.

III. Methodology

This national report draws on the conclusions and recommendations of a range of sources providing insight into the national implementation of the European Solidarity Corps.

Sources can be divided into three categories:

Most reports referred to are **studies**, commissioned by the NAU and/or NA, conducted by independent research institutions between 2014 and 2024. Depending on the focus of the study, these sources employed a range of qualitative (interviews, focus groups) and quantitative (survey, dashboard data) methodologies, described in detail in each report.

- Stevens, F. (2017). Midterm Evaluation of Erasmus+ Youth in Action. Howest. Referred to as **Howest, MT EVA E+ 2017**
- Stevens, F. (2019) [Research project on competence development and capacity building in Erasmus+: Youth in Action. RAY CAP Module A+B. Belgium \(Flemish community\)](#). Referred to as **Howest, RAY CAP 2019**
- Stevens, F. & Desnerck, G. (2021) [Effects and outcomes of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programma. RAY MON](#). Howest. Referred to as **Howest, RAY MON 2021**
- Boone, K. & Stevens, F. (2021) [Onderzoeksproject over organisatorische ontwikkeling en lerende organisaties in de Europese jeugdsector](#). Howest. Referred to as **Howest, RAY LEARN 2021**
- Vermeire, L. & Van den Broeck, W. (2023). [The role of digitalisation in youth work and non-formal learning in the contexts of the European Youth Programmes. National Case study Analysis for Flanders \(Belgium\)](#). Imec-SMIT, VUB. Referred to as **VUB, RAY DIGI 2023**
- Deleu, H. & Claeys, J. (2024) [End and Midterm Evaluation of Erasmus+ Youth](#). Odisee. Referred to as **Odisee, MT EVA E+ 2024**
- Deleu, H. & Claeys, J. (2024) [End and Midterm Evaluation of the European Solidarity Corps](#). Odisee. Referred to as **Odisee, MT EVA ESC 2024**
- Suykens, B. (2024) Mid-term evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy in Flanders, Belgium. Ghent University. Referred to as **UGent, MT EVA EYS 2024**

A second type of source are reports produced by the NA between 2014-2024, as part of their reporting to the NAU and to the wider public. These reports make use of beneficiary and financial data available to the NA, complemented by narratives data (testimonies from beneficiaries) and insights based on the expertise of NA staff.

- JINT (2021). [A look back at the European Youth Programmes 2014_2020](#). Referred to as **JINT, Overview 2014-2020**
- JINT (2014-2023). Annual Reports for the Flemish Government. Referred to as **JINT Report 2014, 2015, ...**

Finally, some external sources have been consulted:

- VLEVA (2023) Liaison Agency for Flanders-Europe. [Monitor EU Subsidies in Vlaanderen 2021-2022](#). Referred to as **VLEVA 2023**
- [Proposal for a Council Recommendation 'Europe on the Move' learning mobility for everyone](#). Referred to as **COM 2023**

Additionally, some observations based on the expertise of the NA have been included and referred to as 'NA Notes'.

Among these different sources, the recent ESC Evaluation Reports delivered by Odisee University of Applied Science is the **starting point of the analysis**. In this respective report, the perspective of organisations applying for projects in the EU youth programmes takes a crucial place, complemented by a number of other sources. More detailed information on the methodology used can be found in Odisee, MT EVA ESC 2024.

For this national report, the results of Odisee, MT EVA E+ 2024 have been complemented by conclusions and recommendations from other studies and sources, leading to a more complete and rich synthesis of findings with also more attention to long-term developments.

IV. Answers to the standard questions

EFFECTIVENESS

In this section, outputs, effects and impacts on different levels (individual participants, organisations, youth field) are highlighted, drawing on a range of indicators related to the budgets, project application and participant numbers. Particular attention goes to the horizontal priorities, inclusion & diversity and the pandemic.

Output: Received and awarded project numbers, budgets and participants

The **awarded budget** for European volunteering projects has increased strongly between 2014 and 2023. While the budget granted for volunteering activities in 2014 amounted to €723.414, in 2023 this stood at €1.673.670,00.

Participant numbers are also on the rise. The total **number of participants** contracted in 2014-2018 under E+ EVS stands at 795. In the ESC 2018-2020, we had 898 awarded **participants**, and this has risen to 939 awarded participants for 2021-2023 (Table 1 & 2). Of ESC participants, about 7 out of 10 are volunteers, the others being registered in solidarity projects. It should be noted that for solidarity projects, this is a strong underestimation of the actual participant number, as only the core group members are registered.

A big increase in **group/team volunteering** was seen from 2021 onwards as they make up 1 out of 3 volunteers in the last 3 years (Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024, see also Table 3). The NA invested in promoting this option to already accredited organisations and as such to diversify in the way they make use of the programme. Therefore, we can conclude that the programme reaches its targets.

Solidarity projects were introduced in 2018. Since then, 624 participants are registered for this action. From interviews with organisations, we know that the actual number of participants is much higher but that most projects only register the core-group members as the technical aspects required are very high, especially getting a PRN-number is seen as a big obstacle for registration. Therefore, the participant number does not reflect the actual impact.

The **occupational strand** did not manage to reach organisations and no projects were funded in the period 2018-2020. The complexity of the procedures, rules as well as the low funding compared to other funding available on the national and European level are the main reasons for this, despite the effort of the NA. (JINT Reports 2018-2020)

Until 2020, the **success rate** in volunteering projects was almost 100%. The success rate from 2021 onwards lowered due to ambitious and strategic plans of volunteering organisations and at the same time lower available budgets and higher (much needed) unit costs. While the overall success rate of submitted projects in 2021-2023 remains rather high, promising projects got refused or downscaled by the NA because of the insufficient budget

for the current demand. In 2023, only 68% of the requested budget for volunteering could be granted, and for the first-time projects reaching the quality threshold were rejected due to budget shortage (Notes NA). The budgetary pressure puts also the shared ambition to make the programme more known and more inclusive under strain (Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024).

A dedicated budget for **NET activities** since 2018 has proven to be effective, even if it took until 2021 to deploy the full NET potential. In NET 2018 and 2019, the NA and the NA network needed time to develop a targeted strategy and networking and training activities supporting the objectives of the European Solidarity Corps. Covid-19 interrupted the growth pattern abruptly in NET 2020. Since budget year 2021, the NA has spent the allocated NET budget for the full 100%. The majority of the realised transnational activities are single and low entry activities which support (first time) applicants and beneficiaries in the development and implementation of qualitative volunteering and solidarity projects. This is reflected in the four most recurrent themes: capacity building for mentorship in volunteering, support to mental health of volunteers, inclusive and diverse ESC projects and the value of solidarity in local communities. National activities are highly relevant and needed in NET. It allows the NA to set up small-scale, cost-effective and flexible activities supporting directly the needs of ESC beneficiaries: they ensure low threshold formats as entry point in ESC, such as introductory training to new target groups and project management trainings for young people. Additionally, they support networking and community building between organisations, such as peer-to-peer exchange between organisations holding a Quality Label, and young people active in the different ESC actions (Notes NA).

A major quality and support measure for volunteering projects is the **Training and Evaluation Cycle (TEC)** for volunteers and volunteering organisations. The yearly TEC budget available allows the NA to set up quality on arrival and midterm trainings for the volunteers in support of their non formal learning during the volunteering project period. Due to the Flemish youth work-friendly context, where for instance affordable youth accommodation is available, TEC can be realised with a reasonable budget. The redundant budget is transferred to the volunteering project budget, where a shortage exists. Next to TEC for volunteers, TEC also supports the Quality Label organisations with training and peer-to-peer coaching session with the aim of creating a learning community and increasing the quality of volunteering projects (Notes NA).

Effects on individual participants and organisations

In terms of their impact, beneficiary organisations perceive ESC projects as **transformative experiences** for young participants. While the full impact on participants is often only perceivable after a long stretch of time (e.g. in terms of impact on choices in education, employment, personal life), on the short term there is evidence that European volunteering offers as solid learning experience, affecting especially personal development more strongly than other (short-term) types of mobility (Howest, MT EVA E+ 2017).

In addition, ESC volunteering offers opportunities for **organisational development**. International volunteers bring new skills, viewpoints, and youthful motivation to the host organisation's team. In addition, they bring internationalisation to the local target groups of this organisation, who may not be aware of mobility options or for whom this may not be an option. In sum, the impact of volunteering extends clearly beyond the individual experience (NA notes).

While the long-term effects of ESC are difficult to measure, insights from surveyed organisations highlight the long-term impacts of ESC on participants, emphasising ESC's role in broadening horizons, fostering cultural understanding and promoting solidarity. Connections made, topics addressed, and partnerships formed, shape the organisations policies and activities. Sometimes ESC has become integral to their policy and mission as a means for internationalisation (Odisee MT EVA 2024).

Inclusion and diversity

Inclusion is an important theme within ESC projects that has been put to the front as a priority by the European Commission and that also resonates with the applying organisations' concerns and the NA objectives.

In terms of individual participants, in the Flemish context we identify three primary groups of **individuals facing FO**, which are pertinent to the ESC programme: disadvantaged young people who encounter social exclusion (e.g. young people in youth care or in a NEET situation), individuals who have migrated to Belgium and do not have full citizenship and individuals with mental or physical disabilities. It is widely acknowledged by various stakeholders that ESC presents opportunities for these diverse groups, and participants numbers show already a significant share of YPFO. This is also reflected by the rather **high proportion of YPFO** in the participant numbers. For instance, in the period 2021-2023, the share of YPFO among volunteers varies between 44.7% and 51% annually. YPFO usually have less opportunities for internationalisation than other young people, ESC opens up opportunities, especially for them.

However, there is still room for improvement. Age restrictions, residency permit conditions, the complexity of the application process and a general lack of familiarity with the programme are hindering inclusion efforts (Odisee, MT EVA ESC 2024). As described below, lowering the minimum age could facilitate more young people with fewer opportunities to participate in volunteering as was the case in previous programme periods (Odisee MT EVA ESC).

In fact, the shift in **age limit for volunteering** from 16/17 (under EVS) to 18 (under ESC) represents an obstacle in two respects. First, it has a large impact on certain target groups addressed by the programme: Youth Care institutions and organisations targeting young people who are NEET could no longer use the programme, and especially volunteering projects, to work with this very vulnerable target group. For them, the main target group are 15–18-year-old youth leaving care or dropping out of education. Second, for young people wanting to do a voluntary gap year after graduating from high school, this is only possible for those who graduated at the age of 18, which excludes half of the young people

that have their birthday in the second half of the year. This seems a missed target group for the European Solidarity Corps Programme, even more so since this groups had access to volunteering until 2018 (JINT reports 2014-2023).

In terms of activities, promoting **short-term activities** might be considered as a means to foster inclusion since they are easier to organise for individuals, including for YPFO facing specific barriers to go abroad for a longer period (e.g. because they are contributing to household income). However, this idea is not always underpinned by experience, as stakeholders indicate that the effort by organisations to prepare, guide and follow-up YPFO for a volunteering experience requires a lot of additional support that goes far beyond the standard. Stakeholders from organisations and the NA also stress the benefits of long-term ESC projects and emphasize that the European Commission's promotion of short-term activities should not be solely motivated by cost-saving measures or a means to increase the number of participants (NA notes, Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024).

However, from the current research, we learn that ESC offers an accessible way for internationalisation, despite the remaining thresholds. A main condition to include young people in general, and YPFO especially, is an intermediary organisation that reaches out to young people and can guide them through the process (Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024).

It should also be noted that the EC registration tools do not offer an accurate image of all programme actions, as for some, no information is collected on the FO status of participants. Moreover, since the EC's participant registration focus has shifted significantly across programme periods, extra caution is needed when comparing previous and current programme periods. Since 2021, participants with fewer opportunities have been counted on the basis of 'funding for inclusion support'. While this approach seems straightforward, organisations working with YPFO do not necessarily apply for it, as it is not always needed or because participants feel stigmatised by having to apply for additional funding. As a result, inclusion figures do not always provide a clear or complete picture. For solidarity projects' participants, the funding cannot be requested, so these figures are not available (JINT Reports 2023, Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024, NA notes).

The impact of Covid

For obvious reasons, the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on the implementation of the ESC programme. However, the support of the NA and the resilience of youth work and volunteering organisations limited the impact, often requiring adaptations, resulting in a limited number of cancelled projects or volunteers unable to realise their projects. The NA invested in good cooperation with the national authorities during the first days of Covid-19, so that volunteers could, if needed, return/be repatriated to Belgium or to their sending country. In addition, clear communication on the possible scenario's proved essential in keeping organisations and volunteers on board during this challenging period. After the pandemic period, there has been a sharp increase in project application numbers, especially for solidarity projects. The social and mental effects of COVID on volunteers could not be underestimated. Since meeting physically in regular TEC activities was difficult, these were replaced by an online series of meetings, called What's Up. With the support of the ESC

trainers, volunteers met online and could get in touch with an experienced trainer if needed. This was highly appreciated by volunteers and organisations (JINT Reports 2020 - 2021).

EFFICIENCY

In this section, we focus on the efficiency of the programme, with particular attention to the size of the budget, the programme governance, support and management tools.

Size of the budget & absorption level

Since 2021, the **budget requests for volunteering** have consistently exceeded the available budget. The stagnant budget forecast hinders ESC from reaching its full potential by limiting the allocation of additional projects and involvement of more volunteers, including YPFO. The NA has been able to absorb the available financial resources but has to downsize and refuse projects. The requested budget for 2023 was 169,16% of the available budget for projects, especially for volunteering. This created in a much lower number of volunteers granted than the organisations had requested (see also above). This in sharp contrast for the absorption levels for volunteering in the period immediately preceding ESC: in the period 2014-2017, there was no full absorption level for volunteering (cf. the Mid-term evaluation for Erasmus+ 2017). The ESC created high expectations towards an increase in the budget so additional efforts were done to recruit more organisations. The introduction of the Quality Label and the strategic approach also created the expectations for organisations to invest more in volunteering and to grow (Howest, MT EVA, NA additional notes, MT EVA, Odisee).

In response to the high demand for volunteering activities, the NA needed to make **significant budget transfers**. For instance, in 2023, €180.000 was transferred from the training and evaluation cycle next to the additional €280.833 Horizon Europe budget, as the initially awarded budget was only €1.293.325. Compared to 2020, this is a significant drop with 16% as the initial budget was €1.533.023. The budget decrease impacts the number of volunteers. This effect is heightened given that the average cost per volunteer has risen due to a necessary increase of the unit costs triggered by inflation. Budget transfers and more short-term projects ensure that the number of volunteers can stay at a certain level but do not cover the strategic plans for organisations as described in their Quality Label plans (JINT Reports 2014-2023).

From 2024 onwards, volunteers are allowed to do several volunteering experiences up to 12 months. It is not expected that many volunteers will actually go on several longer term volunteering but it is expected that this measure will facilitate a higher budget uptake as 'empty days' can be used in old contracts and consecutive in new contracts, so volunteers can actually be for a longer period in an organisation but in 2 contracts. As such, this will impact the number of volunteers.

At the level of **awarded projects**, there are some concerns about the (in)sufficiency of their allocated project budget. Organisations hosting volunteers do not always get by with the budgets provided by the ESC programme. The participants themselves usually consider

their participation as affordable, but among YPFO this sentiment is less pronounced. (Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024).

In terms of **the length of stay**, approximately half of all volunteers are involved in a long-term individual volunteering experience. Team volunteering is on the rise since 2021 and accounts for around 1 out of 3 volunteers. The remaining group are individual short-term volunteers (around 14%). These figures indicate that there is a balance between long- and short-term volunteering (Table 3).

However, long-term volunteering is under pressure, especially due to the limited budget available in this action. For some organisations, it is pivotal that volunteers stay for a long period. The first months, organisations put a lot of effort into training, language and task support. It is only after several months, that the hosting organisations really starts to reap benefits. From this perspective, it would be counterproductive to offer more short-term volunteering opportunities to more volunteers. As a result, organisations would step out of volunteering projects. Moreover, the impact on volunteers in terms of language learning, skills development, etc. would also be different (NA notes).

Programme governance

The **indirect management** by a NA specifically focusing on the youth field, allows to promote and implement the European Solidarity Corps in the national context in an efficient and effective manner, **attending the needs** of the local and national **youth field** stakeholders. The Department for Culture, Youth and Media is the NAU for ESC in the Flemish Community, overseeing implementation and reporting to the European Commission. JINT vzw manages ESC actions, bridging between organisations and the European programmes. JINT clarifies complex policies to (potential) beneficiaries, making ESC participation more accessible. Therefore, the NA is a crucial intermediate structure enabling ESC activities to take place (Odisee, MT EVA ESC 2024).

Management tools & administration

In order to efficiently streamline administrative processes, several support tools have been developed by the EC. Overall, there are several recurring issues with the **ESC management support tools**, including technical glitches and user-unfriendliness, which have worsened over time. Almost all surveyed organisations express frustration due to these malfunctions hindering necessary tasks. The NA offers necessary support, but the power to make substantial changes to the IT tools lies with the European Commission. Suggestions include diversifying the application process for solidarity projects and providing alternatives to the administratively heavy application module.

Despite these difficulties, stakeholders also notice positive evolutions in the management support tools, such as less extensive final reports and – especially – the introduction of a Quality Label for ESC organisations. However, challenges with IT tools persist, leading to postponed deadlines for the NA, slow working tools, and increased administrative workload for both NA staff and beneficiaries. The IT issues have impacted performance indicators, NA's staff well-being, and the perception of European Programmes as being

bureaucratic. The programmes have been struggling with management tools since 2014. The situation around the deadlines and postponement never got solved in Erasmus+ and the first ESC programme. The complexity has only increased since the 2021 MFF started. The NA has to invest substantially in administrative support due to the malfunctioning tools and/or the complexity of the tools. In addition, plenty of energy is invested in technical support towards beneficiaries that could have been better invested in quality support. Reporting tools are present but are not always reliable and results have to be checked and rechecked. Indicators are requested but cannot be retrieved from the tools i.e. YPFO in solidarity projects. The yearly reports indicate as well that time is invested in mental support to beneficiaries and NA staff to deal with the frustrations of the tools. For the future a stronger focus should be put on minimum standards for volunteering focussing more on health and safety, inclusion guidelines (MT EVA, Odisee, NA notes).

Volunteering organisations as well as the NA also express doubts about the effectiveness of the **Youth Portal** and the **Online Language System** (Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024). Volunteers and organisations prefer real live language lessons over online, as these do not only serve as language courses but also give the volunteer the opportunity to integrate in the local community and meet new people. It is not clear to what extent EU Academy is used (JINT Reports 2018-2023, NA notes). In addition, some stakeholders highlight the absence of a feedback mechanism for partner organisations. In terms of support mechanisms, training and evaluation measures are highly valued by volunteers and organisations. The impact of networking, peer-to-peer coaching and training should not be underestimated, as also indicated in contacts with organisations and volunteers (Odisee MT EVA ESC 2024).

The **Youthpass tool** is perceived positively by some organisations. They find it easy to create Youthpasses and appreciate its support to the registration and validation of the learning outcomes of volunteers. Others question its effectiveness, especially regarding its influence on CVs and the relevance of the key competences. Additionally, certain target groups, such as those with mental disabilities, may find the Youthpass inaccessible. Despite varying opinions, stakeholders agree on the potential of the Youthpass but emphasise the need for more flexibility in its application (MT EVA Odisee).

The **anti-fraud measures** work relatively well for Erasmus+, however, for the European Solidarity Corps, they do not always make sense. It is not possible to check double funding at application level for volunteering, as double funding can only arise if a volunteer is funded twice for the same activity. As solidarity projects happen at the local level, it is technically impossible for projects to take place in other countries and qualify as double funding (Notes NA).

RELEVANCE

In this section, the relevance of the programme's objectives is scrutinized, before addressing more extensively methods and levels of outreach.

Relevance of the objectives

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

Over 2021-2023, 95 distinct organisations were awarded ESC projects, compared to 100 in 2018-2020 and 103 in 2014-2018 spanning both youth and voluntary organisations. Stakeholders consistently prioritise the learning dimension of individual volunteers and young people in ESC projects, with societal changes ranking second. However, the achievement of learning outcomes for young people or societal changes varies among projects.

Outreach of the programme

The National Agency uses a supportive approach towards beneficiaries to attract new organisations, to reach out to young people with fewer opportunities or to young people who belong to less strong youth structures. This supportive approach of the National Agency is highly appreciated by the beneficiaries (Howest, MT EVA E+ 2017).

Stakeholder groups that were more difficult to reach under the previous programme period 2014-2020 were **informal youth groups** and **local organisations**. It was argued that this was because of the lack of national programme opportunities, which are often a stepping stone towards international projects (Howest, MT EVA E+ 2017). In response to this lacuna, the introduction of national opportunities in the ESC (solidarity projects) can be considered a positive evolution.

Solidarity projects attract a whole range of informal groups and youth organisations of which many work with YPFO. The set-up of this action is an easy introduction into European funding. Since 2023, the action is really taken up with a full budget uptake. It remains to be seen how organisations also see it as a first step into internationalisation and/or mobility projects (JINT Report 2023).

COHERENCE

In this section, we investigate to what extent the ESC programme is complementary to other national and international programmes in the field of volunteering, and what synergies exist.

Volunteering schemes

In the Flemish context, the central action “Volunteering in high priority areas’ did not seem to affect the indirectly managed volunteering opportunities (additional notes NA).

Bel’ J is a programme that makes youth exchanges, youth work training and volunteering possible with partners in the other Communities of Belgium. This programme is designed as complementary to the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme (including EVS) and it is

also governed by JINT. Before Bel'J was launched, Flemish young people could go to all other European countries, but not to one of the other regions of Belgium (Howest, MT EVA E+ 2017). The ESC and the volunteering actions in particular are complementary to Bel'J volunteering, just like Erasmus+ Youth in Action's EVS used to be. The scope of Bel'J is more limited in time (shorter periods), with a more generous age range (16-30) than ESC 2018-2027 and a more modest budget.

More recently, an initiative under the name "Voluntary Citizens' Service" has been introduced in Belgium by an independent organisation. This initiative could be complementary to ESC in-country volunteering but has its own rules and procedures. Due to the limited funding available for transnational volunteering, the NA has not been funding projects under this initiative (Notes NA).

Finally, a considerable amount of ESC organisations has been active in Erasmus+ Youth or its predecessors. This is not surprising as many of these were already active in volunteering under Erasmus+ Youth in Action until 2018. It also underpins the observation that in the Flemish national context, the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ Youth are strongly complementary (Odisee, MT EVA ESC 2024). Nevertheless, the ESC also serves a unique range of organisations (e.g. care institutions, civil society organisations, nature conservation groups, ...) that fall outside the scope of Erasmus+ Youth.

Schemes for in-country activities

Some municipalities, regional bodies and civic society actors have small grant systems focussing on civic engagement and young people. Examples are local community budgetting, project grants of the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) in Brussels, project grants of the King Baudoin Foundation and the Ghent EYC 2024 project funding. The NA has ad hoc contacts with some of these initiatives and encourages rejected applicants, if possible, to look for alternative funding and vice versa. Because the growth of national opportunities in ESC is a fairly recent phenomenon, seeking synergies is work in progress (Additional notes NA).

EUROPEAN ADDED VALUE

In this section, we highlight the added value of the ESC from different perspectives, including its added value compared to the EVS programme.

Added value of the European Solidarity Corps

Erasmus+ Youth and the ESC are the only programmes that make international mobility possible in the youth field in Flanders. This was also the case for its predecessor Erasmus+ Youth in Action (Howest, MT EVA E+ 2017). For cross-border volunteering in particular, the ESC is the only programme that makes international volunteering affordable to a wide group of young people.

A clear benefit of having a European programme, is that there is a clear framework to involve all stakeholders in the same manner and with the same rules in all programme countries. Realising a similar framework from a national level would require many bilateral

agreements, which would be difficult to realize for a small country. In addition, the clear option of the European Commission to invest in learning mobility and to increase the budgets in time of austerity is a major achievement. As pointed out by a policy maker at the DG-NA meeting in March 2024, a programme with a specific focus on young people gives a clear signal from the EU that it recognises their importance. Now, the European Solidarity Corps, although one of the smaller EU programmes, does specifically that (Howest MT EVA ESC 2017, Notes NA).

Before 2018, EVS was part of the broader Erasmus+ Youth in Action program, but ESC emerged as a standalone initiative in 2018. ESC's autonomy as a Youth Programme within European policy, offers specific advantages. One cited advantage of ESC over EVS involves the flexibility in setting up individual volunteering projects, where organisations no longer need to pre-select volunteers at the time of project application, but can apply based on their mission and objectives. Another major benefit lies in solidarity projects, fostering positive change within local communities and engaging young people who may not be drawn by international actions.

Cooperation with third countries

The accessibility of volunteering throughout the programmes 2014-2027 for volunteers in or from non-associated countries neighbouring the EU is highly appreciated and well used in Flanders. Some volunteering organisations deliberately invest in this form of volunteering, even though visa procedures make this burdensome. The Belgian federal government and the regional governments have worked together to establish a 'single permit' procedure for incoming long-term volunteers in Flanders. This procedure is operational since 2023 and will be supportive to a smooth incoming of long-term volunteers in Belgium and Flanders.

V. Recommendations for the future

GOVERNANCE: STRENGTHEN THE POSITION OF THE ESC AND REALISE ITS POTENTIAL

- Develop an adequate **growth path for the ESC budget**, with a double aim: on the one hand, to meet the strategic and budgetary needs of current ESC Quality Label organisations in terms of their volunteering projects better, on the other hand, to allow the ESC programme to realise its full potential by reaching out to new beneficiaries also in solidarity projects and to provide more support, in particular to YPFO.
- Maintain the ESC as a **dedicated youth programme**. A separate youth programme with a clear link to the EU Youth Strategy implies a strong support and recognition of the youth field. In the EU Youth Strategy framework, the programme is a crucial tool for implementation and guarantees the recognisability and impact of the youth sector on European as well as on national and local level.

- Ensure the **indirect management system** for ESC, and strengthen NAs in fulfilling their position as intermediate support structure, among others by equipping them with adequate resources to develop their supportive approach to beneficiaries, as well as networking and training activities for volunteers and Quality Label organisations in the ESC.
- Recognise and ensure the **coherence between the two programmes**, ESC and Erasmus+ Youth as strategic tools connected to youth work and supporting the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy. At the level of NAs, maintain the strong management link between the EU Youth programmes as they are strategically placed to implement, target, and impact the Youth field in Flanders.
- Consolidate **synergies** with other EU programmes such as Horizon Europe as they bring added value to all involved.
- Improve **the monitoring** of the European Solidarity Corps, by increasing efforts to collect valid and complete data on relevant indicators across all programme actions, through performative, transparent monitoring tools (incl. the EC Dashboards) while strengthening the NA network's complementary initiative to monitor the programme's effects and impact of the ESC via the RAY network.

QUALITY: PROVIDE A VARIETY IN ACTIONS AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS

- Maintain **national opportunities** in the programme, both in terms of funding opportunities for local projects (Solidarity Projects), as well as in training and networking activities. National opportunities increase the outreach of the programme significantly to new groups of beneficiaries and are often a stepping stone for participants or beneficiaries to participation or project application in other (international) actions in the programme.
- Provide adequate **support to long-term volunteering opportunities**, in recognition of its high impact on individual learning and communities.
- Support the further development of the **ESC Quality Label**. Stakeholders recognise the importance and advantages of working with the Quality Label, including less administrative hassle for beneficiary organisations and the responsibility to promote ESC for other organisations.
- Consolidate **networking** and **training** activities. Networking activities are essential as a quality framework surrounding the project funding, while they also enable capacity building for organisations. The Training and Evaluation Cycle (TEC) is essential for a quality implementation of volunteering and could be even more developed in the support of the Quality Label organisations.

MANAGEMENT: REDUCE THE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

General recommendations

Reduce the **administrative obstacles** and **burdens** for project applicants, project participants and the NA.

- Apply the **proportionality** principle, at all levels and actions: from registration and certification to application and reporting as well as in project management and contractualisation.
- Establish actions with **clear objectives** and **transparent, simple implementation rules** to ensure accessibility of the programme. Simplified funding rules based on unit costs and lump sum models have proven their value and could be simplified even more in the future.
- Ensure a **balance** between registration and control on one hand and on the other hand information and quality support.
- Prioritise solving the technical problems with **the IT tools**, as malfunctioning or non-user-friendly tools are experienced as very daunting by all stakeholders and reflect on the overall image of the programme.
- Ensure **coherence** in the size (min 4 young people) and age of the young people for informal groups between Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps.

Action-specific recommendations

- For **solidarity projects**, administration and management requirements should be attuned to a young target group. Alternative methods of project application could be considered, more attuned to a diverse range of young people. In addition, bring registration more in line with young people's reality. The current obligatory PRN registration for all participants is an obstacle for getting correct insights in the number of and profile of the participants.
- For **volunteering**, volunteers and organisations need to be supported by a path of well-integrated, communicating IT tools that are user friendly, and are adapted to a young person volunteering for a small organisation. Currently, the number of IT-tools surrounding volunteering activities is not attuned to the management capacity of a small organisation.
- Ensure the participation of volunteers and organisations from **non-associated countries** to the EU as they bring an added value to a programme focused on solidarity.

INCLUSION: TACKLE BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

- Continue the **flexible financial approach** to reduce obstacles for inclusion. This approach should on the one hand be general, through unit costs, and on the other hand have a real cost approach, according to the needs of organisations and young people.

- Support inclusion of volunteers who face **visa requirements**. Assure that Directive 2016/801 is applied in all EU countries. The new 'single permit procedure' in Belgium has improved the accessibility of the programme for those volunteers in Flanders.
- Consider revising **age limits** to foster inclusion through facilitating YPFO participation. For volunteering, the minimum age limit of eighteen is an obstacle when working with particular categories of YPFO, such as NEETs. It leads to a missed opportunity of the programme to contribute to addressing societal issues like school dropouts and youth care leavers.

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VII. Tables

Table 1: Overview number of projects, budget, number of organisations and participants per ESC Key Action (BE FL, Call Years 2018-2020)

Key Action	Action	Received projects	Awarded projects	Success rate	Grant Amount Awarded (EUR)	Budget Share (in the respective Youth Program)	Participants in Awarded Projects		
							Total	With SN	With FO

Volunteering (SPV)	Volunteering Projects (ESC11)	119	113	95,0%	€ 3.723.958,57	90,4%	635	7	253
Solidarity projects (SPR)	Solidarity projects (ESC31)	63	48	76,2%	€ 395.134,00	9,6%	263	0	0
TOTAL ESC		182	161	88,5%	€ 4.119.092,57	100,0%	898	7	253

(source: Dashboard)

Table 2: Overview number of projects, budget, and number of participants per ESC Action and Call Year (BE FL, Call Years 2021-2023)

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

(source: Dashboard)

Table 3: ESC volunteering participants per type and duration of their completed volunteering projects (BE FL, Call Years 2021-2023)

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

(source: Dashboard)

VIII. Annex

ANNEX 1: THE SELECTED QUESTIONS FROM THE EC'S GUIDANCE NOTE TO EVALUATE THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

<i>Evaluation Questions per evaluation criterium</i>	<i>Selected yes/no</i>
<i>Effectiveness</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have the three programmes European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 delivered the expected outputs, results and impacts? What negative and positive factors seem to be influencing outputs, results and impacts? We are interested in the impact of all elements of the two programmes. We are also interested in the impact of elements that have been discontinued between the period 2018-2020 and the period 2021-2027 of European Solidarity Corps and/or the European Voluntary Service to the extent that it might help to design the future programme. 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With regard to the inclusion priority, what are the main concrete impacts of the European Solidarity Corps programmes 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 on the participants who are young people with fewer opportunities? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What have been the unintended effects and their magnitude of European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020, if any? 	no
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With regard to European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027, what can be done in order to increase the number of participants in short-term activities (e.g. volunteering teams and solidarity projects) and, as a consequence, the number of participants in the whole Programme? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are the effects of the solidarity activities likely to last, for both participants and local communities, after the end of the intervention? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are the programmes' results adequately disseminated and exploited? 	no
<i>Efficiency</i>	

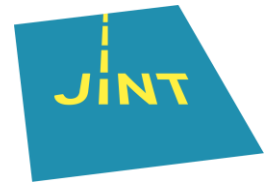
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the cost-effectiveness of the various operational actions of European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027? 	no
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the cost-effectiveness of the quality support measures (training and evaluation measures, inclusion, online linguistic support, etc.)? 	no
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent is/was the size of budget and the funding models appropriate and proportionate to what European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 set out to achieve? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the financial absorption levels across National Agencies? Has the target number of participants in solidarity activities been achieved? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent has the portal replaced the functions of supporting organisations? Are there any duplications between the portal functions and the role of supporting organisations? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent is the implementation of actions in indirect management appropriate, efficient, and well-functioning? How efficient is the cooperation between the European Commission and National Agencies, and to what extent does the European Commission fulfil its guiding role in the process? How has this evolved over time? What are the areas for improvements? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are the monitoring mechanisms applied by the National Agencies efficient/cost effective? What are the areas for improvement, considering the need for a smooth and effective implementation of the programme? 	no
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are the management support tools (e.g. E+ Link, eForms, Mobility Tool, Lifecard NAM, Youth Portal, PMM, BM, Application Forms, EU Academy, eGrants) adequate and sufficient to support a sound management of the programme? 	no
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent have the anti-fraud measures allowed for the prevention and timely detection of fraud? 	no
Relevance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many and what types of positive societal changes have been induced by the programmes at national level? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on assessment, is the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 perceived as a programme about the learning dimension of young people or more on addressing societal changes? To what extent is it both? What type of activities are offered to young 	yes

volunteers and participants in solidarity projects? What are the predominant types of participating organisations: volunteering or youth organisations? Has the number of volunteering organisations involved in the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps programme increased compared to the European Voluntary Service (EVS)? What about 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme compared to EVS?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is the design of European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027 oriented and focused on people with fewer opportunities? What factors are limiting their access and what actions could be taken to remedy this? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the analysis of the impact of European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020, are there any elements that have been discontinued (i.e. are not included in European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027) and could have a possible value added in future generation of the European Solidarity Corps programme? 	no
<i>Coherence</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent has the action “Volunteering in high priority areas” complemented and added value to the indirect management volunteering projects? 	no
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 been coherent with relevant EU programmes with similar objectives such as Erasmus+, Cohesion policy programmes funded under ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus) and/or ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), Horizon Europe? To what extent have European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 proved complementary to other EU interventions/initiatives in the fields of youth? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 been coherent with various interventions pursued at national level which have similar objectives? To what extent have European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 proved to be complementary to other Member States’ interventions/initiatives in the field of volunteering in support of humanitarian aid and in the field of youth? 	no
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do programme priorities reflect the expectations of the society? Is it effective to update priorities every year? 	no
<i>European added value</i>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the additional value and benefit resulting from EU activities, compared to what could be achieved by Member States at national and/or regional levels? What did the European Solidarity Corps programme 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 offer in addition to other education and training support or solidarity schemes available at national level? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the benefit and added value of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2018-2020 and 2021-2027 compared to the benefit of the European Voluntary Service? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be the most likely consequences of stopping the European Solidarity Corps programme as a stand-alone programme? 	yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there national schemes that could effectively replace the European Solidarity Corps if no funding is allocated in the future? 	yes

ANNEX 2: LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DCYM	– Department of Culture, Youth and Media for the Flemish Community
E+	– Erasmus+
EC	– European Commission
ESC	– European Solidarity Corps
EVS	– European Voluntary Service
EU	– European Union
FO	– Fewer Opportunities
MFF	– Multi-annual Financial Framework
NA	– National Agency
NAU	– National Authority
NET	– Networking Activities
NEET	– Not in Education, Employment, or Training
OLS	– Online Language Support
PMM	– Project Management Module
PT	– Project Teams
RAY	– Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes
SALTO	– Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities



- SOL – Solidarity projects
- TEC – Training and Evaluation Cycle
- VOL – Volunteering Projects
- VZW – Vereniging Zonder Winstoogmerk (non-profit organisation)
- YPFO – Young People with Fewer Opportunities