

European Solidarity Corps programme final evaluation for 2018–2020 and interim evaluation for 2021–2027

FINAL REPORT

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Survey: European Solidarity Corps programme final evaluation for 2018–2020 and interim evaluation for 2021–2027

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Abbreviations

Agency – Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Agency

EACEA – European Education and Culture Executive Agency

E+ – Erasmus+ programme

ESC – European Solidarity Corps programme

Ministry – Estonian Ministry of Education and Research

SOL – solidarity projects

TJ – traineeships and jobs (supported activities from 2018 to 2020)

VOL – volunteering activities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) is a programme established in 2018 and funded by the European Union. It serves to support the voluntary engagement of young people aged 18 to 30 and solidarity projects addressing community issues. The programme's objective is to strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity, and civic identity by addressing societal challenges.

The aim of the evaluation underlying this report was to assess the implementation of the ESC in Estonia: the report includes the final evaluation for the period 2018–2020 and the interim evaluation for the period 2021–2027. The evaluation focused on decentralised (i.e. nationally managed) actions implemented by the Youth Programmes Centre of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Agency operating within the Estonian Education and Youth Board (the agency).

The evaluation sought answers to specific questions concerning the programme's effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and added value (see Annex 1). The results can be used to review the programme conditions and processes to better fulfil its goals. Therefore, the evaluation provides information necessary to update the current programme and design any future versions.

In compiling the final and interim evaluations and addressing the research questions, pre-existing data sources were mainly used, including past relevant research reports, programme-related strategies and development plans, and other documents and reports. Additionally, summary data aggregated in the programme database were reviewed, and individual and group interviews were conducted with representatives from the Ministry of Education and Research, the agency and target groups. The evaluation results were validated with sectoral experts and representatives of target groups, the agency, and the Ministry of Education and Research. The evaluation results should be interpreted with caution due to uneven data quality, which limits the ability to provide a comprehensive overview of programme implementation and effectiveness.

According to the evaluation, the ESC programme is both relevant and effective. It reflects national and EU youth policy objectives and societal expectations, providing an opportunity to achieve them. The ESC complements other youth programmes and national efforts in the youth sector. The programme budget has been absorbed, quantitative objectives have been achieved, and the supported actions have had the desired impact on participants, organisations supporting youth and communities. Participation in ESC actions promotes democratic values such as solidarity, diversity, tolerance and openness. Participation in the actions helps young people become more entrepreneurial, gain valuable work experience and future skills, and better understand their abilities, interests and personal characteristics. The capacity of organisations to effectively engage young people improves. Society becomes more tolerant, and several community issues are addressed. However, the magnitude of the impact is not known precisely or exactly measurable.

The ESC budget is invaluable for supporting systematic volunteering activities and youth-initiated solidarity projects. The evaluation suggests that to maximise impact and engage as many young people as possible, the ESC budget should be increased. As rising living

expenses require unit costs to be increased, the number of young people who can be supported decreases. Thus, the programme faces a dilemma: either engage a larger number of youths for a shorter period of time, demonstrating the quantitative efficiency of funding, or support a smaller number of participants while focusing on the quality and impact of the activities.

The effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of the ESC are most influenced by the programme's outreach to target groups. Given the programme's limited budget and tight competition in application rounds, the agency is doing a good job of reaching target groups. However, the evaluation indicated that more efforts could be made to reach young people with fewer opportunities and those who have not previously participated in ESC or E+ measures. This requires, among other things, clearer programme guides, closer collaboration with specialists working with target groups, and a more user-friendly and functional registration platform and application and reporting environments.

Based on the evaluation results, the ESC is an effective programme. The supported activities and target groups, as well as application and reporting conditions, are generally relevant. The programme complements other funding opportunities and provides significant added value as a standalone EU youth programme. The evaluation findings predominantly focus on enhancing the programme's implementation efficiency.

The following recommendations for enhancing the current programme and designing future iterations were formulated in the course of the evaluation (more detailed recommendations can be found in the conclusions and recommendations section):

1. Continue funding the ESC, implementing current actions and developing the programme. The ESC should remain a standalone programme to maximise the benefits in the context of both EU and Estonian national youth policies.
2. Review the indicators and consider which data and how should be collected from representatives of target groups and beneficiaries, as well as on projects, to support programme management decisions.
3. Further simplify programme guides, contracts and website content intended for target groups, as well as the design of the application and reporting environment.
4. Increase focus on young people with fewer opportunities.
5. Increase the overall programme budget and unit costs for expenses and reconsider the proportions between actions to improve programme effectiveness.
6. Maintain the flexibility member states have in budget redistribution between actions to ensure efficient budget use.
7. Streamline IT systems to enhance programme implementation, monitoring, application and reporting efficiency to ensure that the systems operate smoothly and support programme management.
8. Pay more attention to task distribution among stakeholders and potential collaboration in programme promotion, target group outreach, improving activity quality and setting priorities.

1. ESC DURING THE PERIODS 2018–2020 AND 2021–2027

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) is a European Union solidarity programme launched in 2018. It aims to support solidarity activities through the engagement of young volunteers and organisations and to strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity, and civic identity by addressing societal issues. ESC focuses on the creation of a more caring society by bringing young people together and offering the target group the opportunity to participate in voluntary work (in-country or abroad) and in local solidarity projects. From 2018 to 2020, the programme also covered traineeships and jobs (both in-country and abroad).

ESC measures are open to citizens and legal residents of the European Union and partner countries aged 18 to 30. The duration of supported activities for young people is between 2 weeks and 12 months,¹ and the duration of projects of volunteering organisations can be up to 24 months. The following table provides a more detailed overview of the programme and its various periods (Table 1).

Table 1. Conditions of the assessed ESC programme periods as of the end of Period I (2020) and as of the last assessed year of Period II (2023)

	2018–2020 ^{2,3}	2021–2027 ⁴
Actions	<p>Volunteering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual volunteering (2–12 months) • Volunteering teams (2 weeks – 2 months) • Volunteering partnerships – a three-year framework agreement granting annual operating support for the implementation of volunteering <p>Humanitarian aid volunteering – for ages 18 to 35; centralised activities, not subject to this evaluation</p> <p>Traineeships (2–6 months) – providing professional experience; paid</p> <p>Jobs (3–12 months) – employment contract, salary</p> <p>Solidarity projects (2–12 months) – projects initiated and implemented by young people to solve community problems</p>	<p>Volunteering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual volunteering (2–12 months, with a minimum of 2 weeks for young people facing fewer opportunities, as an exception) • Volunteering teams (2 weeks – 2 months) <p>Volunteering teams in high-priority areas (2 weeks – 2 months)</p> <p>Humanitarian aid volunteering – for ages 18 to 35; centralised activity, not subject to this evaluation</p> <p>Solidarity projects (2–12 months) – projects initiated and implemented by young people to solve community problems</p>

¹ European Solidarity Corps. (2020). European Solidarity Corps Guide. https://euroopanooored.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/European-Solidarity-Corps-Guide_2020.pdf.

² Ibid. European Solidarity Corps. (2020).

³ Regulation (EU) 2018/1475 of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2. (2018). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1475/oj>.

⁴ European Solidarity Corps. (2023). European Solidarity Corps Guide: 2023 Call. https://euroopanooored.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/european-solidarity-corps-guide-2023_en.pdf.

	<p>Cooperation, quality and support measures – supporting participants and organisers in ensuring a high-quality service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • networking activities • security checks • quality and access measures (training activities,⁵ language support, insurance, accident and health insurance, Youthpass, capacity building, administrative assistance) • quality label • ESC Resource Centre, ESC portal and other online services and IT systems 	
Budget	<p>Total for the period: EUR 375.6 million, with EUR 3.6 million in Estonia⁶ (including national co-financing of EUR 250,000)</p> <p>Recommended budget allocation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VOL and SOL 90% • TJ 10% • Up to 20% of the total funding for in-country activities 	<p>Total for 2021–2027: EUR 1.009 billion.⁷ Total for 2021–2023 in Estonia: EUR 3.3 million⁸ (including national co-financing of EUR 317,716)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian Aid Corps VOL 6% • Other VOL and SOL 94% • Up to 20% of the total funding for in-country activities

Comparing the activities and conditions of the two periods, the most significant change was the discontinuation of the traineeships and jobs action and volunteering partnerships (a part of volunteering). Changes in eligibility have been rather limited and related to VOL measures (e.g. the eligibility of transport costs). The most significant changes in eligibility date from 2024 and relate to both VOL organisational costs and SOL costs.

From 2018 to 2020, 130 projects with a total of 1,045 young people participating were granted a total of 3,117,682 euros of support.⁹ From 2021 to 2023, 120 projects, in which 977 young people participated based on their applications, were granted a total of 3,500,263 euros of support.¹⁰ From 2021 to 2023, volunteers were mostly engaged in the fields of youth work and education, and the majority of SOL projects focused on inclusion and diversity (Figure 2 in Annex 2). Most of the applications were submitted by youth sector organisations (Tables 8 and 9 in Annex 2). Programme outcomes are detailed in the “Effectiveness” section and in Annex 2.

⁵ ESC training activities, including learning mobility, are not the focus of this evaluation.

⁶ Budget implementation data from the Agency.

⁷ Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council. (2021). Chapter V, Article 11.

⁸ Budget implementation data from the Agency.

⁹ Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Agency. (2020). Results of the European Solidarity Corps 2018 –2020 programme. <https://infogram.com/esk-infograafika-nooredee-veebi-lho16vew0oo82nq>.

¹⁰ Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Agency. (2023). Results of the European Solidarity Corps 2021–2023 call for proposals. <https://infogram.com/1pnn67wpnjvg1dhz6wgmwjd9phmedn5pq5>.

Table 2. ESC 2018–2020 and 2021–2023 Estonian outputs¹¹

	2018–2020	2021–2023
Number of applications submitted	178 ¹²	149
Number of funded applications (success rate)	134 (75%)	120 (81%)
Number of participants (actual/planned)¹³	816/736	977/830
Share of young people with fewer opportunities	26%	29%
Organisations holding a quality label by the end of the period	162	174
Grants issued	EUR 3,117,682; approx. 77% VOL, 15% SOL, 9% TJ	EUR 3,500,263; approx. 85% VOL, 15% SOL

¹¹ Annual reports of the Agency

¹² Traineeships and jobs: 6 projects, 91 participants, 57 participants with fewer opportunities

¹³ Data corrected by the Agency

2. METHODOLOGY

The evaluation methodology was chosen based on the availability of quantitative data collected over time on the ESC programme, along with several studies that reflect its activities. In order to avoid excessive burden on the target groups, the evaluation focused on the analysis of available data. Target groups were contacted primarily for data refinement and validation purposes. The following methods were used for the final evaluation of the ESC programme for 2018–2020 and the interim evaluation for 2021–2023:

- Document analysis, including
 - previous research
 - strategies and development plans related to the programme
 - programme guides, application and reporting forms, information seminar slides
 - the agency's work plans and reports to the Commission
 - annual reports and infographics published by the agency
 - quantitative programme data provided by the agency
- Dashboard data – overview of project applications, funded and implemented projects, feedback from project participants
- Personal and group interviews (11 interviews with 36 participants)
 - Introductory interviews with ministry and agency representatives
 - Focus group interviews with representatives of target groups (organisations, young people, mentors)
 - Personal interviews with representatives of target groups (organisations)
- Written and verbal feedback from the target groups received during the outreach process for this study
- Focus group interview validating the results with sectoral experts and representatives of the beneficiaries (5 participants) and validation seminar with representatives of the commissioning bodies (9 participants)
- Working meetings, questions and discussions with representatives of the commissioning bodies (ministry, agency) by phone and email

Limitations in the evaluation:

- The dashboard statistics are incomplete (practically non-existent from 2018 to 2020 and patchy from 2021 to 2023) and contain errors, often making it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions. Consequently, we relied more on infographics and reports than initially intended and made additional data requests to the agency.
- The information for the period from 2018 to 2020 is incomplete: reporting to the Commission minimally reflects the ESC activities (however, the situation is improving from year to year); not all of the ESC activities are reflected in previously conducted surveys; international surveys do not provide detailed information on Estonia, although responses were also received from Estonian participants.
- The programme guides and work plans set out expectations for the outputs and results of the programme and the projects, but they are only verbal – that is, the evaluation of outputs is based on the fulfilment of the national plans and changes over time, and the evaluation of results and impact is based on the evaluations of the participants themselves.

- Involvement of young people with fewer opportunities – the statistics reflect only those projects where an additional budget has been allocated for their engagement. The number of young people with fewer opportunities engaged in activities without an additional budget is not reflected in the statistics.

3. EFFECTIVENESS

As a whole, the 2018–2020 and 2021–2023 programme periods have proved effective: the agency's financial resources have been deployed (see Section 4.2) and the goals for the number of participants and the impact of activities have been met (see also Table 7 in Annex 2). No data exists on the effectiveness and impact of the traineeships and jobs measure and SOL projects for the 2018–2020 period for Estonia specifically; nevertheless, studies covering all member states suggest that the projects of this time period also had a positive impact on the objectives of the programme and its activities.

While **the impact of participation in ESC measures varies for each individual**, the evaluation identifies several impacts on individuals, organisations and society, as described in the following subsections.

3.1. Core democratic values

Secondary sources¹⁴ and the interviews showed that **core democratic values such as solidarity, multiculturalism, tolerance and openness deepen** among the participants and individuals working with them throughout the programme periods and across different measures, depending on the nature of the project. The young people themselves often do not associate these concepts with democracy.

Those from Estonia who participated in VOL projects funded by the Estonian National Agency during the first programme period learned about cultural diversity, human rights, fundamental rights and participation. After participating, they considered subjects related to democracy, such as equality, individual freedoms, peace, human rights, democracy and law, more important than before. The participants' awareness of the following policy areas, as well as their perception of their importance, also increased: topics related to Europe; EU policies and structure; practising citizenship and participating in civil society activities; Estonian youth policy; democracy and justice.¹⁵

During the second programme period, similar to the first, the participants saw an increase in their understanding of European values, democracy and critical thinking, and their ability to understand different members of society (including those with fewer opportunities or special needs). The participants experience an overall increase in European cohesion.¹⁶

According to the evaluation, the activities had a similar impact on the organisations associated with the young individuals participating in the activities, as well as on SOL mentors and communities. Interviews with organisations showed that **ESC values are readily embraced through programme activities and subsequently manifest in other activities of the participants**. For both SOL and VOL, it could be seen that in addition to the young people,

¹⁴ Salu, J., Haljasmets, K., Aps, J., Akkermann, C., Kaldmaa, K., Pedjasaar, M. (2021). *Erasmus+: Euroopa noored programmi tulemuste ja mõju-uuring*. Stories For Impact OÜ & Haap Consulting OÜ.

¹⁵ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

¹⁶ Kendrali, E., Raihnelgauz, M. (2023). *Euroopa Solidaaruskorpuse programmi 2021/2022 tulemuste ja mõju uuring (RAY SOC) Eestis*. Tallinn: Poliitikauringute Keskus Praxis. This report was used in the preparation of the current report, although it had not been published at the time of its use.

the activities also influenced the mentors' and youth workers' attitudes, beliefs and understanding of cultural differences. Several SOL mentors and representatives of organisations said that they had gained experiences from participating or supporting young people which transferred to their other activities. Organisations can, for example, gain valuable experience through organising international cooperation and cross-border projects, as well as involving target groups. At the community level, respondents provided numerous examples of SOL projects raising awareness about various issues, engaging diverse societal groups and fostering tolerance and support. Initially critical communities grew accustomed to the young participants, becoming more tolerant and helpful, and appreciating volunteers who were active in the local community. For example, in one project, volunteers introduced their food culture to the locals, fostering cultural exchange.

3.2. Entrepreneurship and employability skills

The analysis indicates that, across the programme periods, **participation in voluntary service enhances the opportunities of young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, in the labour market and increases their interest in entrepreneurship and self-initiative.**¹⁷ According to the young people themselves, participating in ESC actions increased their competitiveness, including skills such as courage to act, project management, organising events, self-expression (oral and written), time planning, teamwork, project writing, coordination, communication and management (including budget management and dealing with unforeseen circumstances), the ability to reason and think critically, language skills, the ability to deal with socio-political issues and complex situations, and the ability to express one's ideas creatively. Also, after participating in the measures, participants notice an increase in self-confidence and better awareness of themselves and their abilities. Project participants also appreciate the opportunity to widen their horizons by learning about other cultures and their customs and practices, as well as themselves.^{18 19 20} Based on the evaluation, it can be concluded that the young people who have participated in the programme, use the experience gained in both their personal and professional lives and continue as active members of civil society.

3.3. Programme priorities

Secondary analysis^{21, 22} and the interviews showed that young people participating in ESC measures learn to better understand their abilities, interests and personal characteristics. Young people who completed the programme deepened their knowledge in various areas, including the programme priorities, which encompass inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, participation in democratic life, and environmental protection, sustainable

¹⁷ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. (2017). *Study on the impact of transnational volunteering through the European voluntary service*, Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/87737>.

¹⁸ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

¹⁹ Ibid. European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, (2017).

²⁰ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

²¹ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

²² Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

development and climate action. The main results in the programme priority areas are outlined below in Table 3.

Table 3. Effectiveness with regard to ESC priorities

Priority	Effectiveness
<p>Inclusion and diversity</p>	<p>One of the main objectives of the ESC is to engage young people with fewer opportunities in its actions. Based on the analysis of secondary sources, the second programme period has seen an increase in the number of participants with secondary education, participants living in cities and participants who feel that they have worse opportunities in life. In addition, 24% of the second-period participants belonged to a minority group.^{23, 24}</p> <p>Volunteering has fostered an understanding of cultural diversity and an increase in tolerance across periods, helping young people understand the problems of different societal groups and develop solidarity and support for others. Participants in the second period learned about the following aspects related to inclusion and diversity during the project: solidarity, diversity, inclusion, empathy, inequality, non-discrimination, acceptability, human rights and equality. Participants' self-assessments showed greater support for diversity and more active opposition to discrimination after their service.^{25 26}</p> <p>Organisations participating in interviews perceived the engagement of young people with fewer opportunities in VOL and SOL as overly bureaucratic; thus, the programme does not facilitate their inclusion to the desired extent (refer to Section 5 for further details). Despite the obstacles, there were organisations that attempted to include and support young people with fewer opportunities in their projects. Projects were also highlighted where activities were aimed at young people with fewer opportunities or special needs or organisations working with them. ESC measures also help connect young people with local communities, thereby increasing social cohesion.</p>
<p>Digital transformation</p>	<p>The evaluation showed that digital tools were integrated into projects and participants' digital competencies were developed during both VOL programme periods. According to previous studies, the first programme period primarily developed participants' digital competencies and their ability to use digital technology.²⁷ In the second period, information and data literacy were developed, and awareness of misinformation and disinformation was raised.²⁸ According to interviews, the extent of the impact of measures on digital skills development depends largely on the specific project and its organisation.</p>
<p>Environmental protection, sustainable development and climate action</p>	<p>The evaluation shows that both VOL programme periods positively influenced young people's environmental awareness and activity levels but in different ways depending on the project's theme and organisation, programme conditions, and other participants in the activities. During the first programme period, young people's contribution to environmental protection increased the most, reflected in activities such as waste sorting, preferring renewable energy and public transportation.²⁹ During the second period, young people's sensitivity to environmental issues increased, and those involved in voluntary service were more inclined to advocate for environmental conservation, both individually and on a social level.³⁰</p>

²³ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

²⁴ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

²⁵ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

²⁶ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

²⁷ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

²⁸ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

²⁹ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

³⁰ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

	<p>The evaluation indicates that SOLs have a positive environmental impact through the execution of environmental projects, enabling young participants to acquire new knowledge and experiences through interactive engagements and discussions on the subject. Additionally, various projects in different domains consciously integrate environmentally friendly practices, such as minimising single-use items and implementing waste sorting measures. The experiences and knowledge gained from projects are also used after the project. The evaluation shows that SOL is an effective measure for raising young people’s environmental awareness and promoting environmentally friendly behaviours. Organisations engaged in ESC measures highlighted their aim to execute projects on subjects that resonate with young people, rendering environmental topics attractive as project themes for both organisations and youth alike. Young people participating in projects disseminate the values and knowledge of the project’s topic to those around them.</p>
<p>Participation in democratic life</p>	<p>The evaluation revealed that participation in ESC develops several knowledge areas related to democracy and promotes active citizenship. Interest and activity in volunteer work, community support and participation in democratic processes increased among participants in both programme periods, and understanding of people from different cultural backgrounds also increased. During the first programme period, there was a greater impact on persuasive self-expression and the ability to participate in political debates, while during the second period, participants gained more knowledge about contributing to European civil society, understanding the European Union, human rights and non-violence, and developed critical thinking skills (see Section 3.1 for more details).^{31, 32} Promoting democratic values through ESC actions fosters active civil society and supports young people’s knowledge and opinions on politics.</p>

Analysis suggests that activities in ESC measures support participants in becoming more tolerant, understanding, open-minded and courageous, resulting in a safer society.

3.4. Collaboration with other participating countries

One of the objectives of ESC is to provide young people with opportunities for solidarity activities in the European Union and other programme countries. During the previous programme period, Estonia hosted foreign volunteers in VOL from 25 countries,³³ while in this programme period, according to agency data, volunteers from 42 countries have arrived in Estonia. Estonian volunteers have served in 25 countries during this period. Thus, the number of countries collaborating with VOL has increased. More than half of the young people who participated in VOL during the first programme period felt that participating in the measure helped promote cooperation within the field across Europe.³⁴ Overall, participants’ understanding of people from different cultural backgrounds improved across programme periods,^{35, 36} which also fosters international cooperation. However, volunteers generally do not continue collaborating with the former host organisation after their volunteering period. As an exception, some cases were mentioned in interviews where volunteers were offered jobs

³¹ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

³² Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

³³ Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Agency. European Solidarity Corps – European Solidarity Corps 2018–2020 Programme Results. <https://infogram.com/esk-infograafika-nooredee-veebi-lho16vew0oo82nq>

³⁴ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

³⁵ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021)

³⁶ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

or where previous short-term collaboration with an organisation led to long-term volunteer work. On the other hand, interviews indicate that positive experiences with volunteering often result in continued collaboration between sending and receiving organisations. As a result, young people are more confidently placed in organisations with which there has been a positive prior cooperation experience.

The programme also has great potential for developing cooperation with third countries through VOL. According to interviews, volunteering or hosting volunteers from third countries can have a greater impact on young people and community solidarity due to cultural differences. Interviews revealed that in addition to volunteers from Europe, Estonia also attracts volunteers from third countries. However, interviews did not reveal a significant impact of such volunteering on cooperation between organisations in different countries.

While the success of the programme for volunteers depends largely on how well their service is organised, organisations in Estonia that send young people abroad do not always have a clear enough understanding of the hosting organisation’s capacity to receive young people and provide them with an experience in line with the programme guidelines. As a result, young people sometimes end up in services of low quality or where not all of the goals or obligations set out in the measure are followed (e.g. mentoring, covering food or transportation costs and workload). In the case of poor-quality or non-compliant VOL, participants may have a negative experience, and the knowledge and experience gained from the activity may fall short of expectations. To improve the quality of volunteering activities and provide young people with a better experience, both national agencies and sending organisations should stress the significance of organisations focusing more on the quality aspects of volunteering activities during training and throughout the process of applying for a quality label. It may also be necessary to give sending organisations and agencies greater control over compliance with programme rules. Additionally, it is important to support organisations with relevant knowledge to help them ensure the quality of partner organisations and VOL.

3.5 Unintended effects and their magnitude

ESC has a vast array of positive effects on its participants and on the local communities where the programme is implemented. However, some unintended effects were also revealed, as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Unintended effects of ESC

Unintended effect	Explanation
<p>ESC actions have become the main national source of funding aimed at the target group</p>	<p>ESC’s large budget and wide reach have helped the programme become a successful volunteer and solidarity experience provider for young people aged 18 to 30 living in Europe. The interviews revealed that Estonia lacks similar national measures aimed at the target group. Therefore, reducing or discontinuing the programme funding could jeopardise the achievement of Estonia’s strategic objectives, as contributing to the community, supporting own-initiative projects and increasing participation in organised voluntary activities are among</p>

	the objectives of the Estonian Youth Sector Development Plan 2021–2035.
Involving young people from third countries is more resource-intensive for organisations	According to the interviews, in addition to young people from other EU member states, young people from third countries are also very interested in volunteering in Estonia. However, their engagement is more resource-intensive for organisations (e.g. more time spent by employees helping the applicant and higher travel costs) and more obstacles emerge (e.g. time-consuming visa application and lack of EU health insurance). In the future, more seamless methods for involving young people from third countries should be identified (see Section 3.6).
Young people with limited financial means have difficulty participating in the programme due to unit prices that do not correspond to the cost of living in the destination country	To include participants with fewer opportunities, the programme offers inclusion support opportunities to cover additional costs. However, several factors hinder the inclusion of those with fewer (financial) opportunities. These factors include the hesitance of young people to disclose their need for extra support, limited budgets, low unit prices, the necessity for additional self-financing to maximise the action's impact, the need to anticipate and plan ahead for engaging individuals with fewer opportunities in volunteering, and the administrative burden associated with documenting costs. In a situation where the support rates do not cover all the volunteer's costs in the destination country, it is more difficult for young people with fewer (financial) opportunities to join the programme and the impact of the programme will be smaller because they lack sufficient financial resources.
Participation in voluntary service purely for the purpose of travel	Interviews showed that some participating young people see the programme as an opportunity to travel for free, live in the destination country and socialise, and do not want to contribute enough to the activities or the hosting organisation.
The budget of solidarity projects being contingent on project duration may incentivise organisations to artificially extend project timelines	SOL budgets are related to the duration of the project. According to the interviews, there is a risk that coordinating organisations or project groups may artificially extend the duration of the project in order to obtain a larger amount of funding. At the same time, it could be seen that in the case of projects "extended" in this manner, more thought was given to the preliminary and follow-up activities that enhance the quality of the project.
The requirement for a project group of five young adults may result in project reports and statistics not accurately reflecting the actual situation in terms of outputs and impacts	Interviews revealed that the requirement of a five-member core group of young adults can pose challenges when organising SOLs, particularly due to difficulties in meeting this requirement stemming from factors such as regional characteristics or limitations in reaching potential participants. Cases exist where young people outside the core project group actually play an important role in the project and where the members of the core group do not themselves carry out the solidarity activities. According to the interviews, in such cases, the experience of these young people remains undocumented. There are also frequent cases where a member of the original core group loses touch with the project and is not replaced. This leads to situations where it is difficult to get feedback on project

	execution from project group members and where the feedback received does not correspond to reality. In addition, the young people who actually contributed to the project will not get the opportunity to give feedback.
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3.6. Factors influencing effectiveness

The evaluation showed that various factors related to awareness, participation, programme conditions and the quality of activities influence the effectiveness of the programme and its actions. Awareness of the programme and its specifics among target groups and affiliated organisations or individuals influences participation. Without participation in the programme, there is no avenue to impact the target group. Once participation is achieved, factors such as participants' motivation, well-planned activities and the role of mentors become crucial. Factors influencing the effectiveness of the programme are discussed in more detail below.

The evaluation revealed that the **factors hindering participation in ESC actions** are as follows: low awareness of the programme and its possibilities (limited awareness or lack of awareness of the programme or its changes leads to low interest); support rates not matching the standard of living in the country of residence; complex application process (including getting familiarised with the lengthy contracts and programme guidelines, visa issues); complex and malfunctioning application and reporting environment (see Sections 4.3 and 4.4); excessively high age limit for participation in the programme, geographical barriers and health problems. Representatives of stakeholders also highlighted visa issues related to participant engagement as a challenge (length of process and visa refusal) (see Section 3.5).

Young people primarily learned about the ESC voluntary service through friends and acquaintances (37% during the first programme period and 32% during the second period), followed by organisations, including youth organisations (38% and 21%) and media or social media (23% and 29%). However, less information about the programme was received through national agencies, schools or universities, youth centres, workplaces or colleagues, mentors, national agency regional partners, and the European Commission's website or other EU youth-related websites, such as SALTO-YOUTH or Eurodesk. Interviews conducted among participants in voluntary service also confirmed that reports on previous actions played a role in raising awareness about the programme.^{37, 38} While hearing about the programme from friends and acquaintances is valuable input and confirms the positive impact of the programme on young people, it does not guarantee widespread dissemination of information due to the relatively small number of participants in past actions. Over the two programme periods, awareness of ESC opportunities through organisations has decreased. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the agency to foster even closer cooperation with youth sector organisations, as well as schools, universities and other institutions frequented by young people, to ensure broader awareness.

Based on interviews and analysis of secondary sources, **the main motivations for participation in ESC actions are as follows**: gaining new experience; meeting and

³⁷ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

³⁸ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

interacting with new people (including those from different cultural backgrounds and other countries); learning something new; personal development and challenging oneself; getting to know a foreign country; interest in another culture; desire to travel or live abroad long-term; opportunity to make new friends; self-realisation, including the opportunity to realise oneself in an area of interest; opportunity to gain work experience, experience working abroad, or experience in a specific sector (e.g. youth work, project writing); language learning; uncertainty about future plans; experience of independence; previous experience of participating in Erasmus+, ESC, or a similar programme; previous positive experience of friends with the programme; demand for volunteers in specific organisations or regions, and recognition of the value of voluntary work in the project; addressing societal issues; assisting disadvantaged individuals; building a more inclusive society; alignment with project themes or fields; and simply enjoying oneself and making the most of time spent.^{39, 40}

The conditions of the actions and awareness of them also affect programme participation and effectiveness. Misunderstanding of opportunities (e.g. awareness of the age range of the target group) and overly restrictive conditions (e.g. age or other restrictions on the target group) hinder participation. During interviews, representatives of programme stakeholders emphasised the shortcomings of SOL age restrictions and considered it necessary to lower the age limit, for example, to 16 years. They emphasised that the early engagement of young people in rural areas helps to connect them more closely with the region and the local community. Representatives of organisations highlighted the challenge of recruiting sufficient numbers of young adults for SOL activities in sparsely populated areas. In addition, young people, mentors and representatives of organisations all mentioned that younger participants are very interested in the action and often participate in project implementation without their experience being recognised or included in feedback surveys. ESC funding is regarded as one of the most crucial opportunities for providing activities to young people in rural areas. Therefore, there is a desire to allow the participation of younger individuals within the programme framework. However, the evaluation indicates that lowering the age limit for SOL could generate even more interest in the programme, which might lead to older youths, who already have fewer opportunities for non-formal education, being even less likely to participate in the programme.

According to interviews, **opportunities to increase participation in ESC actions** include the following: raising awareness among the target group (young people) and stakeholders (people working with young people, authorities and society) about the programme, its opportunities (including inclusion support) and the value of non-formal education; disseminating project results; introducing an elective course enabling the implementation of SOL in schools; supporting the launch and implementation of project team activities by strong mentors or youth sector specialists; increasing support rates and adjusting them to better meet the needs of the target group; shortening the duration of activities; lowering the age limit for participants. Additionally, in the future, the information about operating organisations on the national agency's website should be updated.

The quality of projects and the nature and diversity of activities provided to young people also influence programme results. Given that projects are mainly supported and mentored by youth sector organisations (see Table 7 in Annex 2) and organisations with quality labels in VOL, and training sessions are offered to target groups to improve the quality of activities, it can be

³⁹ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

⁴⁰ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

assumed that the impact of the actions regarding the objectives of the ESC is greater than it would be if young people were supported by specialists not familiar with the youth sector (see also Section 4.5). The fact that young people can choose the organisation to volunteer for, often volunteering in youth organisations offering diverse activities, and the discussion of activities beforehand contributes to achieving a positive impact. However, interviews showed that young people are sometimes modest or hesitant to step out of their comfort zone to seek greater self-challenge and more diverse experiences. The same phenomenon can be observed in SOL: young people can choose the activities themselves and (with the support of a mentor) contribute to the community and challenge themselves.

3.7 Duration of the impact of the actions

The evaluation indicates that ESC actions influence participants, organisations and communities both in the short term and in the long term. Young people who participated in VOL or SOL experienced significant development in their skills and attitudes, which persisted after the end of the action. Participation in the actions supports the career and educational future of participants by promoting necessary skills (language proficiency, teamwork, adaptability, initiative, project writing and management, etc.) and helping young people gain a clearer understanding of future opportunities, thus expanding their career prospects. Additionally, VOL projects offer opportunities for gaining work experience in areas where extensive opportunities are lacking in Estonia (such as working with newly arrived immigrants). Some volunteers have also remained employed with the organisations after participating in the actions. Furthermore, participation in VOL and SOL acts as a springboard for the emergence of new projects. Interviews revealed that many young participants gain a positive experience, leading them to participate again in the future and, in some cases, to organise projects themselves. Graduates of Erasmus+ and ESC projects have also founded non-profit organisations dealing with Erasmus+ and ESC actions after repeated participation in the actions. Participation in SOL also increases young people's willingness to continue their studies and shapes their vision of their future education and career paths.⁴¹

Interviews revealed that the implementation of VOL and SOL in local communities also affects the communities and opportunities available to them. The actions can, for example, direct attention to specific community problems, involving community members in finding solutions, resulting in improved relations within communities and advancing internal synergy. In addition, VOL and SOL have raised awareness and positive attitudes towards multiculturalism in local communities, thereby contributing to the overall well-being and social cohesion of communities.

Interviews also revealed that ESC actions have various positive effects on participating or related organisations. In the short term, organisations achieve their goals and derive satisfaction from supporting young people in voluntary activities or in implementing their ideas. One example of long-term impact is organisational cooperation: experiences and best practices are shared among organisations and with the national agency. The programme offers additional opportunities for collaboration, such as organisations pooling their resources to provide full-time volunteering opportunities. Additionally, participation in actions and quality

⁴¹ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

measures enables the application of acquired knowledge outside the programme. For example, it aids in involving and mentoring young people with fewer opportunities or from smaller areas. Cooperation between organisations also ensures a better participation experience for young people. In addition to financial support provided to organisations to offer better opportunities to young people, youth workers under 30 years of age can also participate in the actions, develop their skills and solve problems. This gives mentors the opportunity to acquire project management and mentoring experience, which is beneficial for both existing and future projects, including those not covered by the ESC. Overall, ESC actions contribute to the development of organisations, enabling them to achieve programme goals while also achieving internal organisational and community-supporting goals.

SOLs create positive changes in the communities where they are organised and help develop solidarity, skills and attitudes among the young people participating in the project. In summary, both actions are important for the development of young people's skills, attitudes and networks, exerting long-term positive impact. ESC actions strengthen European identity and promote cooperation among people from different cultures. The actions increase tolerance, multiculturalism, recognition of democracy and support for minority rights, including LGBTQ+ rights. As a result of participation, young people are better able to understand European identity and the core values of the EU, which positively impacts Estonian societal values, attitudes and policies. Both programmes create long-term positive effects on young people's skills and networks, supporting their development and future choices.

Considering that the actions allow participation in both short- and long-term activities, it is reasonable to assess the duration of activities when evaluating results. However, the data underlying the evaluation does not allow for such a detailed assessment of effectiveness. On the one hand, respondents found that long-term full-time activities (VOL) presumably have a greater impact on changing habits and attitudes, but short-term activities with lower intensity (group VOL, SOL) were also considered essential. The respondents observed that for short-term voluntary activities, the organisational administrative burden is higher due to the need to address organisational issues for larger groups involved in group VOL. However, it was also noted that the trend towards short-term activities allows more young people to participate and influences a higher number of participants.

4. EFFICIENCY

Overall, the implementation of ESC has become more efficient over time, considering the programme's objectives. The following section discusses various aspects related to the efficiency of the programme.

4.1. Changes in the actions and the application process

In contrast to the previous programme period, ESC actions no longer include traineeships and jobs. Representatives of organisations affiliated with the agency and the actions, as well as previous studies and explanations from the Commission, have indicated that these actions were less effective than others. This is evident from the lower number of supported projects and young people engaged in relation to the volume of marketing activities. Reports indicate that actual results fell significantly short of planned outcomes: only 60% of the budget was utilised, and the projects involved only 20% of the young people projected in applications (Table 6). Furthermore, these actions were found to obscure the objectives of ESC and duplicate other similar measures and programmes, including opportunities within Erasmus+. **During the current programme period, funding freed from under traineeships and jobs is being redirected towards SOL and VOL, making the programme's budget utilisation more efficient vis-a-vis its objectives.**

Some simplifications of the application process have also been introduced. As a result, the number of evaluated applications has decreased and **the prerequisites have been created for a more systematic, high-quality engagement of volunteers, including greater flexibility for applicants.** Whereas organisations previously applied for VOL support in the form of a single project or a volunteering partnership, in this period, applications can only be submitted by a leading partner possessing a quality label for voluntary activities within a longer-term project encompassing multiple volunteering activities. However, granting greater flexibility and responsibility to the applicant **requires the agency to have (additional) opportunities to conduct more diverse checks to identify issues in a timely manner and support the beneficiary in order to ensure effective project implementation.**

4.2. Programme, action and project budgets and funding models

The total budget for the ESC per year is higher in this period, but the funding allocated to Estonia per year has decreased by about 9% (from EUR 1.2 million to 1.1 million annually). Reports indicate that the budget for project applications has been fully allocated, and there have been instances where some calls for proposals could not be announced (e.g. in 2019 and 2020). In 2018–2020, approximately 12–14% of the project budgets remained unused, partly due to the underutilisation of project grants, exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19.

Budget utilisation **efficiency has been aided by the programme's rules, which allow for budget reallocation.** For example, during the first period, part of the traineeships and jobs budget was reallocated to SOL, and part of the VOL budget to volunteering partnerships, while

part of the surplus from training and networking activities resulting from COVID-19 restrictions was allocated to traineeships and jobs, as well as SOL.

The allocation of the budget across actions, with a particular focus on VOL and international activities, has remained consistent, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Organisations interviewed regard this allocation as reasonable, considering the programme's objectives and the potential impact of the actions (long-term full-time activities have a greater impact on changing habits and attitudes than short-term activities). However, SOLs have also proved to be efficient. SOLs are more efficient in engaging young people in terms of average budget per participant. This efficiency indicator is elevated because calculations typically rely solely on the number of official members in the project group – those formally contributing to the project – without considering additional contributors or individuals influenced or reached by the project. It is common for additional young people to be engaged beyond the formal project group. Interviews also showed that reaching SOL target groups is easier, meaning that the communication activities are more efficient from the agency's perspective. Therefore, when considering efficient programme implementation in the future, **it may be worth reconsidering the proportions of the VOL and SOL budgets.**

Different funding models are used for project financing: unit costs and real costs.⁴² Covering most of the costs based on unit costs is efficient, considering the cost items and the maximum budget for projects and sub-activities. However, low unit costs do not support maximising the potential impact of projects. Estonia is among the countries with the lowest unit costs, with the first increase in unit costs for 2018–2023 being implemented only in 2023. With prices rising by 39.5% during this period, the approximately 20% increase in unit costs has not kept pace with inflation.^{43, 44} Most representatives of organisations and volunteers interviewed stated that they could barely cope with the funding received. Therefore, while the current unit costs allow a wider outreach, it may not be possible to reach young people with fewer opportunities, which is one of the programme's objectives, given the current unit costs and the rules and uncertainties regarding the coverage of additional expenses (see Sections 3.3, 3.5 and 3.6). The apparent efficiency is also increased by the fact that, due to high demand for VOL, projects are not fully funded: the length of service is reduced in order to engage a maximum number of young people. Additionally, organisation representatives noted that shorter and group-based VOLs increase their administrative burden, as support activities for young people must be carried out over a shorter period or issues of many young people must be dealt with simultaneously. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that a balance is maintained and that unit costs align with the organisations' workload.

Several respondents interviewed regarding SOL and VOL projects found **the administrative burden associated with reimbursing real costs to be excessive.** They found that exceptional costs are often too small to warrant the current format of justifying costs and

⁴² See e.g. https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/european-solidarity-corps-guide-2018_en.pdf and https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2021.pdf

⁴³ Statistics Estonia. (2024). Consumer price index calculator. Accessed 2 April 2024. <https://www.stat.ee/et/tarbijahinnaindeksi-kalkulaator>.

⁴⁴ In 2023, organisational support for VOL was raised from 19 to 23 euros, inclusion support from 6 to 7 euros and pocket money from 4 to 5 euros. However, the cost for a SOL mentor remained steady at 74 euros in 2023, similar to the rate in 2018. In 2024, organisational support for volunteering was raised to 25 euros, inclusion support to 8 euros, while pocket money remained unchanged. However, the cost for a SOL mentor increased from 74 to 227 euros. Additionally, Estonia was shifted to a group of countries with a slightly higher standard of living in the grouping of SOL countries' costs. Sources: 2018–2024 Programme Guides https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/european-solidarity-corps-guide-2018_en.pdf, https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2021.pdf, https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf, https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2024_en.pdf

submitting cost documents. Examples were provided where the applicant had to clarify that a young person with fewer opportunities indeed qualified as such, even though they initially covered some costs themselves. Applicants often abandon requests for additional budgets, although such funding could enhance the engagement of young people. Therefore, **to improve the engagement of young people with fewer opportunities, efforts should be made to alleviate the administrative burden on both young people and supporting organisations.**

4.3. IT systems failures

During interviews, several IT system failures were mentioned, confirming previous survey results and information provided in activity reports:

- the system for compiling and submitting reports is often down, crashes, data is not saved or some functionalities do not work (e.g. it is not possible to submit report annexes or they are not saved);
- participant feedback forms are not saved or do not appear under the completed project;
- project details (including participant feedback) are not saved and do not appear under the completed project or in the action statistics;
- programme indicators vary inconsistently over time, even when extracting data for the same period and applying the same filters;
- project checks are not visible in the system.

IT system failures negatively affect the efficiency of both the agency and project implementers. For example, waiting for system issues to be resolved and resorting to parallel systems to prevent data loss are common occurrences. These failures also impede project completion and compromise the quality of essential data needed for monitoring activities and making management decisions. Furthermore, they impact the reputation of ESC and diminish the willingness of target groups to participate in the programme. IT system failures fragment the preparation of reports over a longer period. Agency staff must provide IT-related advice to beneficiaries and compile error reports.

Eliminating IT system failures is one of the biggest opportunities for improving the efficiency of programme implementation and activity monitoring. IT system failures are one of the main reasons for delayed reporting, making it difficult for the agency to plan work and delaying the payment of project grants.

4.4. Programme implementation and monitoring

The management costs of the ESC programme agency in Estonia (including quality measures) account for approximately 13–14% of the national ESC budget. This section addresses the significant problem areas highlighted during the evaluation that impede the efficiency of programme implementation. Once these issues are resolved, resources can be reallocated to further enhance the quality of projects or increase funding.

Various tools have been created to support management (e.g. E+ link, eForms, Mobility Tool, Lifecard NAM, PMM, BM, application forms, EU Academy, eGrants and a youth portal). Over time, some have also been replaced. Interviews showed that **tools supporting, for example, application, reporting, partner search, activity monitoring** (including international comparisons for feedback) **and exchanging data are highly anticipated and necessary**. However, the relevance and adequacy of existing management-support tools cannot be evaluated because they are not yet functioning correctly or are not fully applied and do not significantly contribute to making work more efficient.

This evaluation revealed a lack of solutions or approaches that would allow for quick, specific, cumulative and accurate overview of programme activities and results. Dashboard data is fragmented across different sub-pages, and due to limited functionality, making data-supported management decisions requires a lot of manual work to get a comprehensive picture of the programme, its actions or achievement of the objectives. Additionally, data obtained from the dashboard must be verified before use.

Before devising new solutions, it is crucial to ensure that the fundamental features of the existing IT systems operate smoothly and reliably. This will enable a more accurate assessment of the extent to which current tools support effective management, identify areas for enhancement in their development, and pinpoint any missing functionalities. The evaluation shows that **refining IT systems would reduce management costs, support informed decision-making, and allow agency staff to focus more on marketing the programme and improving project quality.**

Monitoring the achievement of programme objectives (which serves as the basis for adjustments) is also hindered by the programme's inadequate indicator (monitoring) system. For example, while the programme aims to engage young people with fewer opportunities, the current monitoring of this indicator is insufficient. If the engagement of a young person with fewer opportunities does not prompt an additional budget, their engagement is not accurately reflected in the statistics. Hence, **for effective monitoring of objectives and informed management decisions, it is imperative to reassess the data collected and ensure it is clear and unambiguous.**

Efficiency in programme and project implementation also requires attention from the applicant's perspective. Interviews revealed that **complex online platforms with technical hurdles reduce the motivation of participating organisations in both VOL and SOL to engage again.** This imbalance between effort and support received, coupled with potential delays in payments due to technical glitches in the reporting system, underscores the need for improvement. Negative sentiments communicated as a result can also diminish the willingness of other organisations or young people to participate, thereby complicating the task of agency staff in engaging target groups.

4.5. Quality and support measures

The agency should closely focus on the quality of applications and projects to maximise the impact of projects and actions. The following activities are aimed at improving quality: information dissemination, training and evaluation measures (including quality labels), networking activities, mentoring, counselling, etc. The organisations and young people interviewed repeatedly mentioned the **significance of the training and counselling**

organised by the agency for writing strong project proposals and successfully implementing projects (a more cost-effective application and implementation process). Applicants highly value **agency support and the availability of materials in Estonian**, as these contribute to resource optimisation on their end. While thorough familiarisation with previously prepared guidelines, including the ESC portal, would enhance the quality of activities, **target groups prefer shorter and quicker Estonian-language information sources, such as the agency's website and direct contact with the agency**. Moreover, direct contact allows applicants to receive the most efficient project-specific and Estonia-contextualised responses. Given that applicants are young people and organisations submitting complex voluntary service projects, a significant advisory workload of agency staff is inevitable to ensure the quality of projects. The interviews suggest that **with less agency support, the quality of applications, reports and projects would likely suffer**.

In line with the above, the ESC portal, programme guides and the agency website also serve to support target groups. Analysis shows that they sometimes duplicate each other and the advisory services offered by the agency. However, interviews indicate that agency support is used the most: it serves as quick input for specific, context-sensitive questions. The availability of materials in Estonian, including the website, was also considered important. Materials shared across programme countries and those in English are used less frequently. Therefore, while there is some duplication in roles, **without strong agency support, many young people would likely withdraw from VOL or SOL, according to the interviews**.

Online language support, safety assurance and the issuance of participation certificates also likely contribute to quality assurance. Similar to previous surveys, **language support** received negative feedback regarding its limited effectiveness and allocation principles. The **provision and use of insurance** do not sufficiently consider the medical situation in target countries, resulting in additional burdens on participants, mentors and the agency. Not all young people value participation certificates, such as the **Youthpass**; some place great importance on self-reflection, while others do not. Therefore, **these tools do not provide adequate support for ensuring and enhancing the quality of projects and the programme**.

The importance of quality labels, networking and training activities was consistently highlighted as resource-intensive but effective tools supporting more efficient and purposeful project implementation. Acting as a leading, sending or hosting organisation for VOL requires obtaining a quality label, which helps ensure the quality of VOL. Between 2018 and 2020, 162 labels were issued. In the current period, an additional 24 labels have been issued, bringing the number of labels processed from 2018 to the present to a total of 202 (see Table 7 in Annex 2). Some training and networking activities are mandatory for programme participants, while others are voluntary and, depending on the activity, sometimes also open to non-participants in ESC, with the expectation that they may participate in the future.⁴⁵ These training and networking activities, therefore, have a broader impact on the sector, presumably enhancing, among other things, the effectiveness of future communication and advisory activities. **Survey participants considered training and networking activities important, and the evaluation revealed the potential for implementing more of such activities and ensuring better alignment with project or action schedules** to identify various issues early

⁴⁵ The ESC comprises two types of training activities. TEC, or the training and evaluation cycle, is intended for volunteers, organisations and mentors. Certain elements are obligatory (e.g. training for volunteers), while others are optional. NET, or networking activities, are largely designed by the agency itself and primarily support the enhancement of the quality of the programme activities and the overall establishment of a network. In Estonia, activities are mainly focused on supporting SOL actors, fostering the development of VOL lead organisations and expanding the EuroPeers network, both domestically and internationally.

and gather additional ideas for enhancing activities. For example, this could involve improving reporting and reaching target groups for SOL, and providing mentor support, encouraging initiative and increasing engagement in VOL.

4.6. Reaching target groups

Given the current budget constraints, the programme has the potential to benefit more young people, including those who have not previously participated in ESC or E+ measures, particularly individuals with fewer opportunities and those who are less active young people. According to interviewees, **to reach new target groups, the methods and information disseminated should be adjusted** (more targeted marketing and training activities) and **additional methods should be introduced** to make information campaigns more effective.

Survey participants were also asked about their awareness of centralised actions and willingness to participate in them. It was revealed that detailed information about centralised actions fails to reach target groups to an extent adequate for generating interest in applying. Even if there is interest, people might fail to access the necessary information due to the complexity of the instructions, websites and portals, as noted by the interviewees. Agency representatives acknowledged that, even if queried, they lack detailed enough information to generate interest (see also Section 4.7). As a result, the application threshold is higher compared with decentralised options.

The interviews consistently revealed that **the structure of the application environment should be more logical**. The requirement to register on the portal may also pose a hurdle, as many young people prefer not to register or share their data on various platforms. There were also instances cited where a young person did not have an email address, complicating the registration process.

The engagement of young people with fewer opportunities is currently supported by covering additional costs. Programme statistics do not provide an adequate overview of the **number of young people with fewer opportunities engaged**, but all evaluation participants felt that their **engagement level could be higher**. Effective engagement is influenced by various factors, including the vague definition of “young people with fewer opportunities”, the capacity and willingness to engage young people with fewer opportunities, particularly those with disabilities, and the administrative burden associated with reimbursing additional costs related to their engagement (Section 4.4).

4.7. Collaboration among implementation and monitoring partners and stakeholders

Implementing ESC requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including the European Commission and its various units, the implementing agency, the national agency, the Ministry of Education and Research, the auditing institution, and representatives of international and domestic target groups. Cooperation, both domestically and internationally,

is generally considered effective. Roles are mostly understood,⁴⁶ and the Department of EU and International Cooperation at the Ministry trusts the agency in implementing the programme. According to a representative of the Ministry, independent audits and evaluations conducted by the Commission have also provided positive feedback on programme implementation.

At the national level, cooperation between the agency, the Ministry and sector organisations is rather effective: according to the evaluation, there is room for more effective collaboration with the Ministry's youth and talent policy department, for example, in setting common priorities.

Internationally, cooperation takes place on several fronts but often remains rather short-term. More intensive thematic cooperation occurs through networking and training activities. An example of cooperation is the drafting of a joint position of national agencies regarding the continuation of the programme. However, it was generally felt that making any changes to the programme or opposing changes requires closer cooperation among all member states for proposals to gain sufficient support.

Regarding collaboration with the European Commission, the respondents highlighted the need for increased consideration of member states' needs and capacities. For example, discussions and trends related to Erasmus+ have raised concerns that topics and activities may be introduced to the programme without prior agreement at the political level (i.e. at the Council level). This could lead to situations where the decisions and approaches of the ESC Programme Committee do not align with national legislation or strategies.

The evaluation revealed some shortcomings in cooperation between the agency and EACEA. This is especially evident regarding cooperation to promote centralised actions: target groups are not well-informed about centralised opportunities, and agency staff lack sufficient awareness of them, as well as adequate resources for promoting these opportunities more comprehensively. As a result, Estonian organisations and young people are underrepresented in centrally implemented actions.

4.8. Anti-fraud measures and supervision of beneficiaries and participants

The agency's responsibilities also include fraud prevention and supervision of beneficiaries and participants. According to agency representatives, there are no specific measures in place for detecting and preventing fraud, including the automatic elimination of inappropriate applications. However, fraudulent applications have so far been filtered out through the quality assessment process.

Possible violations can be avoided by means such as quality control of applications, background checks on applicants and communication with applicants. Additionally, quality labels can be suspended, put under observation or revoked.

⁴⁶ Centre of Youth Programmes of the Estonian Agency for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. *Management of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps*. <https://europanoored.eu/info/juhtimine/>

To improve the quality and supervision of funded projects, the following options are available: mandatory and voluntary training, networking activities, communication with beneficiaries, report verification, and on-site checks after project completion (desk checks, system checks and on-the-spot checks). Online and written communication is combined with face-to-face meetings.

According to ministry and agency representatives, as well as based on the report submitted to the Commission, there have been no significant violations. However, it was evident that conducting all these checks on a small scale is worthwhile to ensure that compliance with programme conditions is taken seriously. The evaluation did not indicate the need for additional measures, given the volume of projects and the nature of observed shortcomings.

4.9. Efficiency aspects related to programme beneficiaries

Aspects related to overall efficiency across actions include the application process, reporting, communication with the agency, and the experiences of participants and mentors. While not expressly mentioned by survey participants, the evaluation team believes that the low success rate in applications may discourage target groups from applying for funding, as it is inefficient to write applications when the likelihood of funding is low. Consistently cited process inefficiencies include technical challenges with submitting reports, while occasional confusion arises from an illogically structured and inconvenient reporting environment. Some young people and organisations had experienced significant delays in receiving responses from the agency. Overall, respondents displayed a positive attitude, with even the more critical ones acknowledging improvements over time. Regarding the experiences of participants and mentors, it was clear that previous experience with the relevant action and mentoring or guiding young people increases the likelihood of better guidance, improves resource efficiency, helps avoid mistakes and thus makes the activities more effective. However, some VOL mentors also highlighted that over time, the workload has become too heavy, hindering their ability to support young people adequately or at a similar level to earlier years of the programme. The mentor's capacity to guide activity planning and help analyse learning outcomes appeared to significantly influence project efficiency.

Additionally to what was stated in previous sections, some technical aspects affecting the efficiency of participating in the VOL actions were highlighted. Some interviewed young people expressed that finding a sending organisation is time-consuming, noting that organisations may not respond to emails, and the information on the agency's website regarding organisations involved in voluntary work may not be up to date. Representatives of organisations mostly regarded the quality label system and simplified funding applications as reasonable. Some organisations pointed out the inefficiency or time-consuming nature of administrative challenges associated with hosting volunteers, such as applying for ID cards and visas, and the time spent on introducing ESC and VOL to officials. Young people acknowledged that the situation where several organisations are responsible for supporting a young person contributes to more effective problem-solving and helps mitigate the risk of leaving the young person without help if communication or problem-solving with one party does not go smoothly.

Regarding SOL, young people noted that obtaining funding for implementing ideas encouraged more thoughtful project planning and provided an opportunity for more target

groups to participate (for free). The reporting obligations of project group members were considered to hinder efficiency; most interviewees noted that not all initial group members were closely involved with the project until the end, and it was difficult to obtain the necessary feedback from them for project completion. To alleviate the burden on agency staff and simplify the process for applicants, young people without previous project experience would appreciate more detailed information on what and how to precisely describe in the application and report. This would support more reasonable time management for the applicant and improve the quality of applications.

5. RELEVANCE

According to the evaluation, ESC and its actions are relevant considering the strategic objectives of the Estonian youth sector. ESC contributes to the achievement of the overall goal of the Estonian Youth Sector Development Plan⁴⁷ by creating additional safe and supportive development opportunities for young people, including supporting solutions and ideas proposed by young people, discovering talents and strengths, empowering active citizenship, and improving the quality of youth work, with a focus on engaging young people with fewer opportunities.⁴⁸ This is confirmed by the background of the organisations submitting applications (see Tables 8 and 9 in Annex 2) and the thematic areas of SOL projects (Figure 2 in Annex 2). The evaluation showed that ESC is also important for enhancing the competitiveness of young people in the labour market⁴⁹ and for promoting peace, including tolerance and addressing the global political situation. According to the analysis, the supported activities complement each other (providing an opportunity to “get a foot in the door” to contribute internationally or in-country) and additional funding opportunities for the sector (see Section 6.1).

Trough VOL and SOL, the programme addresses both the learning dimension for young people and societal changes. Survey participants observed that these actions inherently contribute to or have the potential to drive social change. Additionally, they noted that young people inevitably learn throughout the process, enriching their experiences and broadening their perspectives. Target groups expressed satisfaction with the programme’s opportunities and could not identify additional activities that should be supported within the framework of the measures to better achieve the programme’s objectives. However, they found that the grant amounts could be higher (see Section 4) and the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities needs to be designed better. In addition, it was apparent from the interviews with young people that the use of funds by VOL hosting organisations and support for young people should be more closely monitored. Instances were reported where hosting organisations failed to assign a mentor, reimburse travel expenses between accommodation and workplace, or cover catering or food costs for participants.

The likelihood of the relevance of actions and activities is heightened by several factors. First, the applying organisations are typically youth sector organisations, which increases the likelihood of self-analysis during and after the activity. Second, these organisations often hold a quality label for voluntary service. Third, projects are carried out in domains that serve societal values. In addition, participation in the programme involves various training activities and opportunities for exchanging experiences.

⁴⁷Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. (2021). Youth Sector Development Plan 2021–2035. https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-09/2_noortealaeanden_arengukava_2021-2035_kinnitatut_12.08.21.pdf. The plan does not directly contribute to the fulfilment of the indicators (except participation in voluntary activities) but supports their fulfilment. It could also impact the number of self-initiated projects, but this indicator is based on the monitoring of another fund.

⁴⁸ See also the Education and Youth Programme. It is crucial to pay attention to young people with fewer opportunities: ESC offers opportunities for language immersion, enables participation in activities that develop and support the youth and enable positive social contacts, and provides good opportunities for supporting and involving young people with fewer opportunities and at risk of exclusion.

⁴⁹ Koha, A., Kukk, I., Lään-Saarik, K., Orion, K., Tikerpuu, M., Rammo, M., Kinkar, V. (2023). *Lifelong Guidance in Estonia*. Education and Youth Board of Estonia 2023.

Focusing on young people with fewer opportunities is relevant. However, this topic requires more careful consideration and clarification for the target groups to enhance their engagement:

- The concept of young people with fewer opportunities is rather broadly defined to ensure that important target groups are not excluded. The evaluation reveals that young people and representatives of organisations often find this description unclear. They stated that they did not know who exactly “young people with fewer opportunities” refers to and were uncertain whether they fell into this category.
- Target groups sometimes lack adequate knowledge, skills and the confidence to include young people with fewer opportunities, including reaching out to them.
- Creating an online user account to participate in the programme, familiarising oneself with the programme’s conditions and opportunities, project contracts, reporting and feedback surveys is too complicated for some young people. The interviewees noted that for young people with less experience and lower motivation, it is easy to give up.
- Sometimes, there is a lack of awareness regarding the possibility of receiving additional financial support and the types of costs reimbursed, which can hinder the engagement of young people.
- The process of reimbursing costs associated with the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities is burdensome; in VOL, the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities and the associated costs are difficult to predict.
- There is uncertainty among representatives of organisations about whether the costs will be reimbursed or whether they will ultimately be borne by the organisation itself.
- Low unit prices, retroactive reimbursement of costs and limited awareness of the need for additional financial support (the need for additional support needs to be anticipated in the application stage) reduce the likelihood of participation by young people with fewer economic opportunities.
- How and to what extent should the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities be monitored? Young people might be reluctant to disclose that they have fewer opportunities, and organisations may hesitate or lack the ability to observe or inquire about this sensitively. How much can be disclosed about young people’s backgrounds in reporting in the context of data protection legislation? Currently, the indicator reflects only the inclusion of those young people with fewer opportunities for whom additional financial support has been requested.

Expanding outreach efforts to target groups on a broader scale is also necessary. Considering the background of programme participants,⁵⁰ additional opportunities have to be found to reach the following target groups: men, young people living in sparsely populated areas and young people who have not previously participated in EU projects. According to the evaluation, the main reasons for non-participation are the low inclusion skills of those working with young people, failure to reach young people, including limited collaboration with those working with young people, limited engagement of past participants in information activities, limited awareness raising among parents, low awareness of programme opportunities (such as

⁵⁰ Ibid. Kendrali, E., & Raihhelgauz, M., (2023).

eligibility criteria (e.g. age), supported activities and support conditions), lack of interest among young people in such activities, and limited budget (requiring participants to use their personal savings).

The budgets for the 2018–2020 programme and the first half of the 2021–2027 period are substantial but not sufficient to achieve a significant impact. Considering the critical importance of the programme objective and the positive impact of the actions on its achievement, the number of young people in Estonia,⁵¹ the number of Estonian youths registered on the ESC portal,⁵² it is evident that the current budget constraints severely limit outreach. Despite the demand for grants and the number of recipients, the funding available only allows for the engagement of a small fraction of the youth demographic. The reimbursement of most costs based on fixed unit prices is considered appropriate given the support amounts and administrative burden; however, according to the interviews, **fixed unit costs often do not meet the actual needs to achieve maximum effectiveness** (see Sections 4.2 and 4.6). Especially in the case of VOL, the interviewees repeatedly mentioned that young people with fewer financial opportunities may not find it reasonable or possible to participate in the actions (see Section 3.5).

Interviewees generally found the duration of the activities appropriate. They believed that longer SOL and VOL durations offer more diverse personal challenges and facilitate the development of new habits, attitudes and values. However, due to the absence of statistical data, it is not possible to compare the interviewees' evaluations against the actual duration and impact of projects. On the other hand, the interviewees noted that not everyone may have the opportunity to participate in long-term activities, so offering short-term activities is reasonable. In the case of SOL, it was observed that projects may be artificially prolonged to obtain a larger budget.

Opinions varied regarding the relevance of the target groups. For VOL, most interviewees found that the current age range is reasonable, considering age-related work restrictions and compulsory education. For SOL, interviewees frequently proposed expanding the target group to include younger individuals, possibly down to the age of 16 (see Section 3.6), as participation at this age could yield significant impacts, fostering solidarity, community contribution and a sense of cohesion. However, some sectoral experts disagreed with the proposal to lower the age limit, deeming it unreasonable. They argued that such a change would result in even fewer resources available for the current target group (ages 18 to 30), who already face challenges within the youth work sector and are more difficult to engage. Given that the targets for the number of participants in the agency's initiatives have been met and supported projects have shown the desired impact according to interviews and previous research, ESC can be considered relevant.

⁵¹ Statistics Estonia website. (2023). Youth monitoring dashboard. <https://www.stat.ee/en/find-statistics/statistics-theme/well-being/youth>.

⁵² According to the agency's data, as of 19 April 2024, 3,586 young people in Estonia have registered themselves on the ESC portal.

6. COHERENCE AND EUROPEAN ADDED VALUE

6.1. Alignment with EU programmes and initiatives with similar objectives

Analysis of the coherence between the ESC programme and other relevant EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, programmes funded under the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and Horizon Europe, shows that these programmes complement each other. The evaluation did not identify competition between programmes or significant duplication of activities that could hinder the practical implementation of programmes. There should be more emphasis on highlighting synergies between different programmes to enable them to provide young people with comprehensive skill development and experiences.

The actions of the Erasmus+ and ESC programmes are aimed at the same societal challenges, such as raising environmental awareness, inclusion and diversity, and youth participation in democratic life. Collaboration between these two programmes enhances their joint impact on youth development, addressing societal challenges and EU priorities. The activities of the ESC programme also significantly contribute towards the objectives of ESF+ and ERDF programmes by providing young people with the opportunity to volunteer or participate in regional SOLs that empower and promote social cohesion in communities in Estonia and abroad. Although the activities of the ESC programme mainly focus on empowering young people and engaging them within communities, such activities may coincide with the Horizon Europe programme, which focuses on funding research and innovation. The synergy between the two programmes creates an effective environment that supports youth entrepreneurship and provides opportunities for additional funding, mentoring and networking to help young people realise their ideas and contribute to sustainable development. As a result of the synergy between the ESC and other programmes, stakeholders can use additional resources and knowledge to effectively address youth-related issues.

The analysis of ESC activities and other EU interventions/initiatives in the youth field shows that ESC has proved to be an additional factor in promoting the implementation of EU-wide youth policy priorities and objectives. It can be concluded from the evaluation that ESC complements EU interventions in the youth sector both indirectly and directly, and does so to a significant extent. The coherence of ESC with key EU youth initiatives is outlined in Table 6.

Table 6. Coherence of ESC with key EU youth initiatives

EU youth sector initiatives	Coherence with ESC
EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027	The ESC is one of the main tools for implementing the EU Youth Strategy in the member states. ESC's activities largely contribute to the fulfilment of the objectives set out in the EU Youth Strategy, such as fostering social inclusion, supporting rural youth and promoting high-quality employment. ⁵³ The ESC VOL and SOL actions enable young people to participate in

⁵³ European Youth Portal. (n.d.). EU Youth Strategy. https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/european-youth-goals_en.

	various activities that contribute to social cohesion, community development and youth empowerment both in Estonia and elsewhere.
EU Youth Dialogue	The EU Youth Dialogue is the EU's largest structured citizen participation process, enabling young people to collectively contribute to discussions and policymaking on EU-wide youth-related topics. ⁵⁴ ESC activities allow young people to participate in VOL and SOLs to better understand societal issues concerning communities both in Estonia and in other countries, providing young people with a broad understanding of youth-related challenges and possible solutions. ESC actions indirectly facilitate activities related to the EU Youth Dialogue. Through the programme, young people gain valuable experience collaborating with peers from diverse backgrounds and regions, fostering mutual understanding and solidarity and enriching discussions.

6.2. Societal expectations and updating priorities

Interviews with participants in the ESC programme and national programme leaders reveal that **ESC's EU-wide priorities largely reflect societal expectations and promote the resolution of youth-related issues within the community**. Key priorities mentioned include youth participation and inclusion, as well as achieving digital and environmental goals. RAY surveys also confirm the compatibility of ESC actions with societal priorities, identifying solidarity projects as catalysts for implementing various social concepts.⁵⁵ The evaluation results suggest that **the current formulations of priorities and application assessment criteria offer enough flexibility to address societal issues effectively**. Hence, to ensure the simplicity of the application process for participants, there is no perceived need to update EU-wide priorities annually.

Nevertheless, interviews suggest that, in some cases, there is a perceived need to **align ESC priorities more closely with Estonia's national goals and thematic areas** to ensure greater community impact of SOLs and VOL. At the decision-making level, strengthening cooperation between policymakers and the agency is necessary to align nationally significant thematic areas with the ESC and to ensure that ESC actions support national priorities and the development of new approaches or solutions.

6.3. ESC's European added value compared with national efforts

Considering the current geopolitical trends and challenges, it is important to provide young people with a platform to get to know each other, enhance their understanding of different cultures and encourage participants to contribute to solving societal problems. Interviews revealed that **ESC is an important funding instrument for Estonia, and its absence or significant reduction would jeopardise the country's strategic goals and important outputs in the youth sector**. Additionally, ESC activities promote the development of a shared European identity and values among young people, which is important for ensuring

⁵⁴ SALTO. (n.d.). EU Youth Dialogue. <https://participationpool.eu/resource-category/participation-in-democratic-life/alternative-forms-of-participation/eu-youth-dialogue/>.

⁵⁵ Eick, J & Strecker, T. (2023). A closer look at solidarity projects. https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/RAY-SOC_Factsheet-Solidarity-Projects_20231004.pdf.

societal continuity both in the member states and the EU as a whole. Analysis shows that ESC activities offer diverse opportunities for youth development, learning and promoting solidarity, while also supporting various Estonian national initiatives and projects. During the interviews, four main points emerged highlighting why ESC activities add value to Estonian national measures:

Structured and consistent support
ESC funding allowed SOL applicants to receive financial support over an extended period, helping to keep initiatives alive and providing the opportunity for further development of project ideas. Additionally, programme funding allowed the engagement of volunteers in various regions, including smaller and resource-poor areas, and provided the necessary support and structure for this.
Practical project writing skills
The ability to impart practical skills, including project writing, project management and planning, teamwork, budgeting and related responsibilities, is considered the greatest added value of ESC SOL implementation.
Diverse opportunities to solve community problems
High regard was given to ESC's capacity to support youth initiatives in various fields and activities, provide suitable opportunities for youth participation, and contribute to greater community impact.
Promotion of internationalism and solidarity in Estonia
VOL has contributed to bringing a dimension of internationalism to various regions across Estonia, and SOLs have promoted solidarity and community development by providing opportunities to participate and contribute to solving both local and EU-wide problems.

The evaluation revealed that ESC and its measures have significant added value and benefits compared with what member states could achieve alone. **The programme empowers young people in member states, provides them with an EU-wide platform to promote European values and solidarity, and allows participants to actively contribute to society's development at both the community and European levels** (for details, see Section 3). Another benefit of the programme is the promotion of international cooperation.

According to the evaluation, during the periods 2018–2020 and 2021–2027, **ESC has significantly promoted cooperation with other participating countries**. One important aspect is that, unlike E+ programmes, ESC programmes do not impose limitations on financial support for projects involving partner countries. This allows for stronger connections and synergies with other participating nations than previously possible.⁵⁶ The interviews revealed that VOL has opened the door to Europe for young people, made it possible to cooperate with volunteers from other countries and helped to promote mutual solidarity. For example, volunteers from third countries were highlighted in interviews. Collaborating with them broadened participants' perspectives on political, social and cultural issues, thereby increasing mutual understanding and respect.

⁵⁶ Ibid. SALTO, (2023).

In the absence of ESC funding, **Estonia would face a significant challenge in finding national systems capable of effectively replacing the resources and support provided by ESC for youth initiatives and voluntary activities.** Interviews indicate that such national systems may be less effective and have limited capabilities compared with EU-wide programmes, hindering initiatives in less privileged areas or the expansion of project impact to a larger target group. In Estonia, ESC measures significantly support non-formal education and voluntary activities, which are crucial for youth development and contribute to lifelong learning and personal growth. According to the evaluation, ESC funding should not be discontinued, as the absence of alternative national systems could lead to several negative consequences for achieving youth policy objectives, including reduced youth participation in society, lack of sustainable resources to support youth initiatives and decreased community cohesion. Continuing to support VOL and SOL through ESC and further developing ESC is crucial to ensuring ongoing youth engagement within EU society.

6.4. ESC as a standalone EU youth programme

Until 2018, ESC's VOL formed part of the Erasmus+ programme as one of its measures, with a focus on the individual volunteer – the young person. Research from that period indicates that VOL participants, as part of the E+ programme, considered acquiring knowledge about cultural diversity (87.9%) and fostering solidarity towards those facing challenges (44.7%) as the programme's most important contributions; however, the participants also felt that the projects' tangible impact on local communities was limited.⁵⁷ When the ESC was established as a programme centred on solidarity in 2018, VOL became part of it, and VOL's focus shifted: now, the impact on the community is also considered essential. Thus, **implementing VOL within the ESC framework has resulted in greater benefits, added value and impact at the community level compared with its earlier implementation under Erasmus+.**

The analysis further uncovered additional benefits derived from ESC as an independent EU youth programme. This was also confirmed by the interviews. The most significant added value is **the increased attention given to voluntary work and SOLs at the local level, which has brought positive results at the individual, organisational and community levels**, ensuring the necessary consistency in addressing youth needs (see Section 3.7). Interviews revealed that **ESC helps to draw more attention to the importance of the youth sector.**

The survey organisers raised the possibility of merging ESC with Erasmus+ during discussions with the survey participants, considering the previous connection of VOL with the Erasmus+ programme and the active involvement of some organisations in both ESC and Erasmus+. However, the interviews revealed that due to the differing objectives and fields of activity of ESC and Erasmus+ programmes, merging the two programmes could be complex, reducing attention given to the youth sector, especially to youth participation in solidarity activities, and posing a risk of decreased budget for the youth sector. **The added value of ESC as a standalone EU youth programme lies in its focus on the youth sector, implementation of youth policy objectives and youth engagement in informal youth groups, providing young people with an easy funding opportunity for their ideas**

⁵⁷ Ibid. Salu et al., (2021).

through SOL or VOL. ESC provides a structure for youth initiatives and offers valuable learning experiences for young people, supporting their further educational and professional development. Additionally, interviews found that considering the needs of young people, keeping ESC separate can ensure flexibility and simplicity of the activities for young people, while continuing to support non-formal education for youth at both the community and EU levels.

The evaluation results suggest that keeping ESC separate offers several advantages at both the EU and national levels, including **easier opportunities for youth participation, a more flexible approach to implementing youth-led projects, and a focus on addressing youth needs and issues**, which are crucial for achieving youth policy objectives. To enhance its added value, it may be beneficial to explore options for further aligning the ESC programme with national priorities (including emphasising the significance of intergenerational cooperation) and raising awareness of the programme among national bodies such as the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board and the Estonian Health Insurance Fund.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ESC is a relevant and effective programme. It aligns with Estonian national and EU youth policy objectives and societal expectations, providing an opportunity to achieve them. The ESC complements other EU programmes and national efforts in the youth sector. The programme offers European-level funding and structural support to young people, enabling them to participate in diverse activities, develop valuable life skills and contribute to solving community issues.

The fulfilment of the planned objectives and analysis indicate that the programme has the desired impact on participants. Young people and organisations involved in the programme consider the activities significant and effective. Participation in ESC activities promotes democratic values such as solidarity, diversity, tolerance and openness. Participation in the actions helps young people become more entrepreneurial, gain valuable work experience and future skills, and better understand their abilities, interests and personal characteristics. Young people participating in voluntary activities deepen their knowledge of inclusion, diversity, digital skills, participation in democratic life and sustainable development. Organisations involved in projects enhance their capacity for effective youth engagement. Society becomes more tolerant, and several community issues are addressed. Furthermore, the projects and ESC's training and networking activities have a broader impact on the sector and stakeholders, including SOL target groups. Training, publication of results and engagement in projects contribute to promoting non-formal education and also draw attention to non-participating young people, youth work specialists and organisations. However, the magnitude of the impact is not precisely known due to incomplete data collection. As a result, any interpretation can only be inconclusive, and comparing the effects of different programme periods is challenging due to limited data availability and programming differences. Evaluating real impact requires representative samples, longitudinal studies, carefully crafted feedback surveys and more detailed discussion of participant assessments.

The evaluation indicates that, without funding for the ESC, it would be challenging for Estonia to find effective national systems to sustainably replace the ESC or to match its funding for the youth sector. From a solidarity perspective, any alternatives would be less effective and restrictive, impeding youth engagement and development in its current breadth and form.

The effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of the ESC are most influenced by outreach to target groups. The evaluation indicates that the programme likely has the greatest impact on young people with fewer opportunities and those who have not previously participated in similar projects. However, reaching such youth is more challenging. Although, according to interviews, the agency strives to reach potential new participants through targeted methods, and project proposals involving young people with fewer opportunities receive higher ratings, analysis of the proportion of young people in Estonia who have participated in similar projects suggests that additional strategies are needed to reach those who have not yet participated. Considering the programme priorities and the low percentage of 18+ youth from rural areas among the participants, lowering the age limit for participation in SOL should be considered. The evaluation concluded that clear guidance materials and effective information delivery are crucial for reaching the target groups. It was repeatedly noted that guidance materials and contracts appear dauntingly long and complex, especially for young people. Additionally,

website navigation can be challenging. Analysis revealed that those who have previously participated in the programme have an advantage because they know where to find the relevant information and what to focus on. While the application process is considered simpler compared with E+ and other similar schemes, organisations and young people new to project planning need support. The burden of application and reporting also affects target group participation. Considering the limited size of project budgets, the administrative burden should be minimised. Therefore, the target group eagerly awaits the simplification of actions and the resolution of IT system glitches.

Special attention should be focused on engaging participants with fewer opportunities. The programme allows for additional funding to engage such participants. However, according to the interviewees, when it comes to volunteering, the necessary budget and cost items for engaging young people with fewer opportunities have to be outlined in the application rather than later in the process. This is because accounting for these costs is bureaucratic, and there is no certainty that the expenses will be reimbursed. The interviewees also noted that the complexity of guidelines, websites, the portal, registration and feedback forms also hinders the engagement of young people with fewer opportunities. Other challenges mentioned include a lack of skills for engaging young people with fewer opportunities or with special needs, a potential need for support persons for effective engagement, and low organisational support rates that do not cover the additional time spent on engagement efforts.

The ESC budget is invaluable for the youth sector, as well as for supporting systematic volunteering activities and youth-initiated solidarity projects. Flexibility in budget reallocation supports the efficient use of funds and allows for adjustments based on circumstances in Estonia. The evaluation indicates increasing the ESC budget should be considered in order to maximise the programme's impact. As rising living expenses require unit costs to be increased, the number of young people who can be supported decreases. Thus, the programme faces a dilemma: either engage a larger number of youths for a shorter period of time, demonstrating the quantitative efficiency of funding, or support a smaller number of participants while focusing on the quality and impact of the activities.

The programme's funding budget is consistently exhausted each year to support project applications, there is not enough funding to publish all planned calls, and there is already significant competition among applicants. As a result, the chances of successful applications from young people with less experience and fewer opportunities are reduced with the current budget constraints. Considering that management costs make up 13–14% of the Estonian programme budget, and a lot of valuable funding is spent on dealing with IT systems issues, increasing management efficiency could potentially generate additional budget for reaching and supporting more young people or increasing unit prices. However, to prevent demotivation due to low success rates, allocating additional budget for calls is required for more targeted marketing efforts. Alternatively, supporting activities with shorter duration may be considered; however, interviewees find that this might reduce the actions' impact on young people, organisations and communities. Given the growing challenge of attracting young people to long-term activities like volunteering, which demands increasingly more resources than solidarity projects, adjusting the budget proportions between volunteering and solidarity projects and facilitating international solidarity projects could enhance alignment with programme objectives by engaging more young people and increasing programme impact.

Recommendations:

1. Continue funding the ESC, implementing current actions and developing the programme. The ESC should remain a standalone programme to maximise the benefits in the context of both EU and Estonian national youth policies.
2. Review the indicators and reconsider which data and how should be collected from representatives of target groups and beneficiaries, as well as on projects, to support programme management decisions. Ensure that the indicators are unambiguous (e.g. verifying that the recorded number of young people with fewer opportunities includes everyone rather than just a subset of those engaged) and accurately capture essential measurements (e.g. distinguishing between the number of group members and the number of participants or beneficiaries for SOL projects). Review the feedback questions and responses to make sure they are unambiguous and can be analysed against the most relevant background traits (e.g. fewer opportunities, special needs, duration of activities and mentor assigned). Focus more attention on analysing the following results and impacts: acquiring and practising future skills and the impact of activities on the community and on youth policy.
3. Further simplify programme guides, contracts and website content intended for target groups, as well as the design of the application and reporting environment. Engage target group representatives and a neutral coordinating service design expert in the adjustment process.
4. Increase focus on the simplification of inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities. Allow national agencies to refine the definition of young people with fewer opportunities based on local conditions. Streamline the application and reimbursement process for additional expenses to be more flexible and less burdensome; for volunteering, transition to a needs-based approach for reporting additional costs, ensuring organisations have greater confidence in getting reimbursed for additional costs. For simpler additional expenses, the possibility of a lump-sum reimbursement could be considered.
5. Increase the overall programme budget and unit costs for expenses and reconsider the proportions between the actions to improve programme effectiveness. If this is not feasible, reassess the programme priorities and decide whether it is more important to offer participation opportunities to more youth by supporting shorter-term activities and reducing the proportion of third-country volunteering or to create more effective, long-term activities. Consider allocating a higher proportion of the budget to SOL, a proven effective and efficient action, to optimise the use of programme resources.
6. Maintain the flexibility member states have in budget redistribution between actions to ensure efficient budget use.
7. Streamline IT systems so that they operate smoothly to enhance programme implementation, monitoring, and application and reporting efficiency. Then evaluate whether current solutions sufficiently support decision-making or if new ones are needed to provide quick and reliable insights, including a convenient cumulative overview of the programme period without additional workload for compilation. This would also reduce the workload associated with preparing the annual reports for the European Commission and studies similar to this evaluation.

8. Focus more attention on the division of responsibilities between different stakeholders and exploring collaboration opportunities. The agency and the Ministry of Education and Research should collaborate more closely in setting priorities. The agency and EACEA should also collaborate more closely to better promote the centralised actions. The agency, target group representatives and youth workers could make joint efforts to promote the programme, reach target groups and improve the quality of activities.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Evaluation questions

The evaluation addressed the following questions, as outlined in the evaluation guidance note. The section numbers containing the corresponding answers are indicated after each question. As the questions sometimes overlap with others or cover several topics or evaluation criteria, responses may be distributed across different sections to avoid repetition.

Effectiveness

3.2.1. To what extent have the European Solidarity Corps programmes 2018–2020 and 2021–2027 delivered the expected outputs, results and impacts? What negative and positive factors are influencing outputs, outcomes 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 under the European Solidarity Corps and/or the European Voluntary Service, to the extent that this may help to design the future programme.

See Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.7 and 3.8; Table 6.

3.2.2. 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?

See Sections 3.2, 3.3, 3.7 and 3.8.

3.2.3. What have been the unintended effects and their magnitude of European Solidarity Corps 2018–2020, if any?

See Section 3.7.

3.2.4. 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?

See Section 3.5.

3.2.5. 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?

See Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5 and 3.8.

Efficiency

3.2.6. What is the cost-effectiveness of the various operational actions of the European Solidarity Corps 2018–2020 and 2021–2027?

See Section 4.

3.2.7. What is the effectiveness of the quality support measures (training and evaluation measures, inclusion, online linguistic support, etc.)?

See Section 4.5.

3.2.8. 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?

See Sections 4.2 and 5.

3.2.9. What was the financial absorption level of the national agency? Has the target number of participants in solidarity activities been achieved?

See Section 4.2, beginning of Sections 3, and Table 7 in Annex 2.

3.2.10. To what extent has the European Solidarity Corps portal replaced the functions of supporting organisations? Are there any duplications between the portal functions and the role of supporting organisations?

See Section 4.5.

3.2.11. 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 the national agency and to what extent does the European Commission fulfil its guiding role in this process? How has this evolved over time? What are the areas for improvement?

See Sections 4.6 and 4.7.

3.2.12. To what extent are the monitoring mechanisms implemented by the national agency effective/cost-effective? What are the areas for improvement, considering the need for a smooth and effective implementation of the programme?

See Sections 4.4 and 4.8.

3.2.13. 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 the sound management of the programme?

See Section 4.4 (and 4.3).

3.2.14. To what extent have the anti-fraud measures allowed for the prevention and timely detection of fraud?

See Section 4.8.

Relevance

3.2.15. How many and what types of positive societal changes have the European Solidarity Corps programmes 2018–2020 and 2021–2027 induced in Estonia?

See Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 5 and 6.2.

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

See Sections 1, 3.5, 5 and 6.4.

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

See Section 5.

Coherence

3.2.18. 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+) and/or ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) and Horizon Europe? To what extent have European Solidarity Corps 2018–2020 and 2021–2027 proved complementary to other EU interventions/initiatives in the field of youth?

See Section 6.1.

3.2.19. Do programme priorities reflect the expectations of the society? Is it effective to update priorities every year?

See Section 6.2.

European added value

3.2.20. What is the EU-wide added value and benefit of the European Solidarity Corps compared with what could be achieved by member states on their own? What did the European Solidarity Corps 2018–2020 and 2021–2027 programmes offer in addition to other education and training support or solidarity schemes implemented in Estonia?

See Section 6.3.

3.2.21. What is the benefit and added value of the European Solidarity Corps 2018–2020 and 2021–2027 programmes compared with the European Voluntary Service?

See Section 6.4.

3.2.22. What has been the added value of establishing the European Solidarity Corps as a standalone youth programme? From the perspective of Estonian and EU youth policy, has the creation of a separate programme been an effective measure in implementing the goals of youth policy? Could the added value be increased and how?

See Section 6.4.

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

See Section 6.3.

3.2.24. To what extent did the European Solidarity Corps programmes 2018–2020 and 2021–2027 promote cooperation between participating countries (including third countries)?

See Section 6.3.

Additional questions

3.2.25. How have the European Solidarity Corps quality label system and simplified funding applications been received by the target groups? To what extent have these initiatives fulfilled their purpose?

See Sections 4.1 and 4.9.

3.2.26. How do beneficiaries and the parties involved in the implementation of the programme evaluate the internal and external coherence, adequacy and appropriateness of the simplification?

See Section 5.

Additional questions for the Estonian-language version of the report

3.2.27. How have the programme actions affected participants' competitiveness in the labour market and in their subsequent studies, including their learning motivation and skills? Do programme actions help to prevent, solve and/or compensate for the mismatch between skills and the needs of the labour market? If so, how?

3.2.28. How can the target group be expanded to enhance the relevance and impact of the actions?

See Section 5.

3.2.29. What is the beneficiaries' satisfaction level with the programme opportunities? Who are the non-participants within the target group, and what are the reasons for their non-participation (barriers)?

See Section 5.

3.2.30. What has been the impact of the actions on the ability of the participating institutions to provide a high-quality service and contribute to the achievement of strategic goals in the field of education and youth? How has the implementation of the actions succeeded in ensuring equal opportunities, regardless of a person's gender, age, nationality and disability? What changes in administrative practice are recommended to enhance social inclusion and the openness of the programme to individuals with special needs?

See Sections 3 and 4.

Annex 2. A quantitative overview of the ESC programme

Table 6. A quantitative overview of the ESC

	2018–2020				2021–2023	
	Solidarity projects	Voluntary service	Volunteering partnerships	Traineeships and jobs	Solidarity projects	Voluntary service
Number of project applications	105	48	15	10	119	30
Number of projects funded	86	27	15	6	92	28
Success rate (%)	81.9	56.3	100	60	77.3	93.3
Number of projects completed	78	25	10	5		
Average grade for project applications	68.4–72	74.3–76.6	78.8	70.6–80.3; decreasing	69.31–72.77; decreasing	–
Average grade for final reports	68.2–72.6	76.4–78.2	71.5–85.5	75.5–72.5		
Average duration of funded projects (months)	10.1–10.8; shortening	14.3–19.5; extending	26–29.8; extending	23.8–30.5; shortening	9–9.8, shortening	19.1–20.2; shortening
Planned number of participants based on applications	446	209	298	91	481	496
Actual number of participants	405	199	192	20		
incl. participants with fewer opportunities	not available	51	0	6	not available	142
share of participants with fewer opportunities (%)		25.6	0	30		28.6
Number of participating organisations		44				
Number of quality label applications	not applicable	174	not applicable		not applicable	29
Number of quality labels issued	not applicable	162	not applicable		not applicable	24
Number of organisations with a quality label by the end of the period	not applicable	162	not applicable		not applicable	174
Budget of completed/supported projects (in euros)	402,640.63	925,984.61	1,165,198.12	200,389.00	478,103.00	3,020,778.00
Average budget per project (in euros)	5,162.06	37,039.38	116,519.81	40,077.80	5196.77	107884.92
Average budget per participant (in euros)	994.17	4,653.19	6,068.74	10,019.45	993.98	6,090.28
Training and networking budget (in euros)	436,661.51				751,527.00	
Training and networking activities and participants	TEC: 725 participants, 60 activities NET: 1385 participants, 49 activities				TEC: 892 participants, 68 activities NET: 618 participants, 87 activities	
Management costs (in euros)	504,240 (13.87% of the total budget)				607,853 (12.51% of the total budget)	
Total budget (in euros)	3,635,113.87				4,858,261.00	

Table 7. Planned (P) and achieved (A) outputs of volunteering and solidarity projects 2021–2023

	Volunteering						Solidarity projects					
	2021		2022		2023		2021		2022		2023	
	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A
Number of participants	140	133	120	214	120	152	200	142	125	179	125	159
Share of participants with fewer opportunities	20%	30	20	29	20	21	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Organisations holding a quality label	50	31	10	4	10	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Organisations holding the quality label of a leading organisation	10	14					N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Agency annual reports to the European Commission 2021–2023 (“N/A” stands for “not available”)

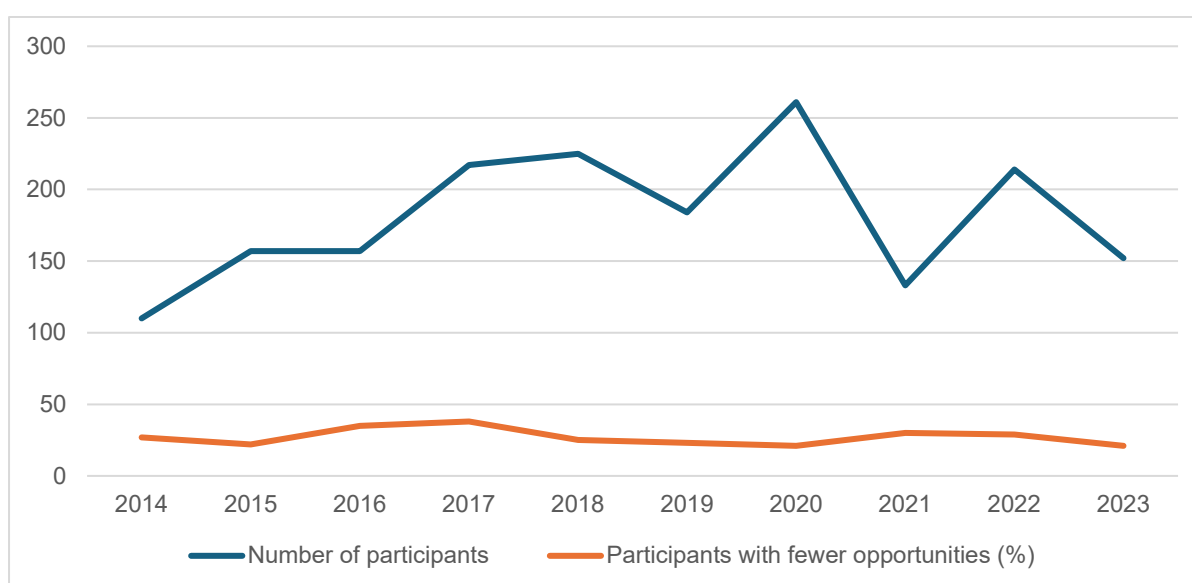


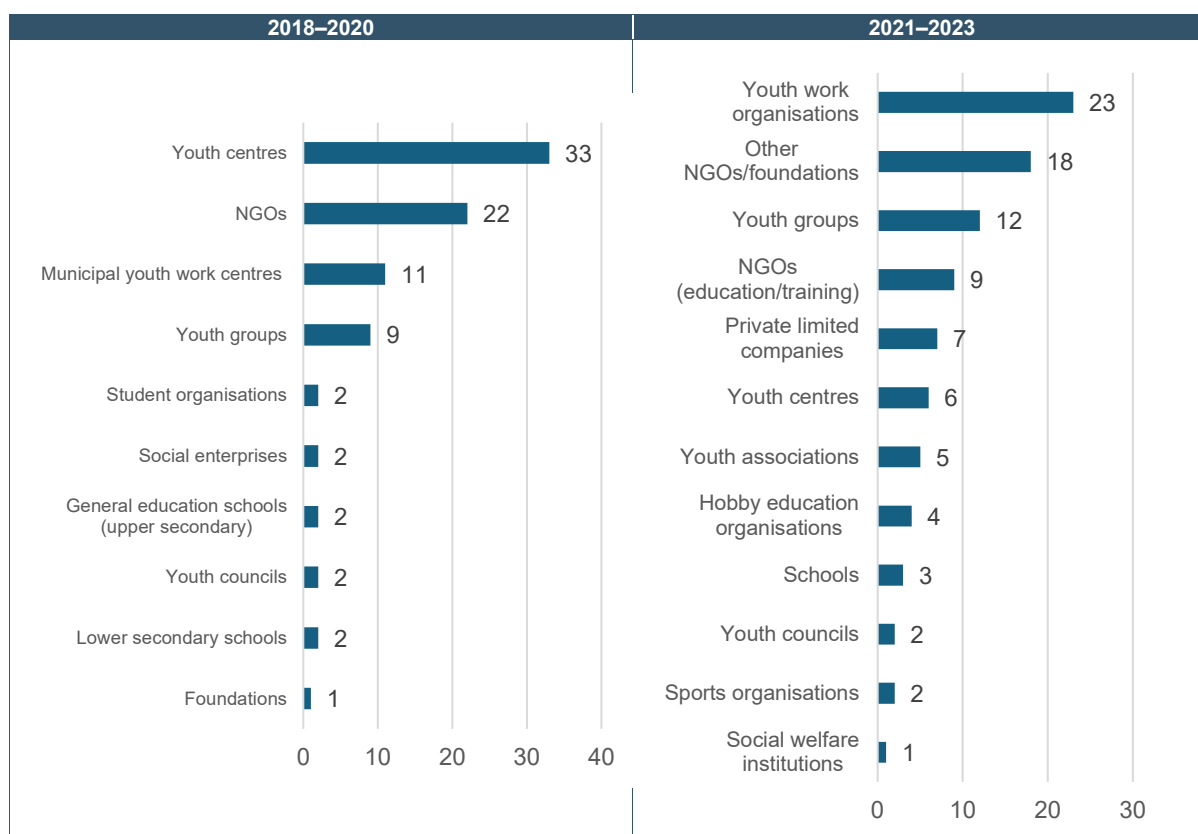
Figure 1. Volunteering participants 2014–2023 (Source: Activity reports of the agency)

Table 8. Organisations supported within the voluntary service framework (applicants)

2018–2020		2021–2023	
Individual applications + partnerships		Leading organisations with a quality label	
Local government agencies	9	Youth associations	11
NGOs	8	Other NGOs/foundations	3
Youth organisations	6	Schools	2
Lower secondary schools	5	Youth work organisations	2
Social work organisations	5		
Upper secondary schools	3		
Youth centres	3		
Public limited companies	2		
Foundations	2		
Vocational schools	1		

Source: Infographics for [2018–2020](#) and [2021–2023](#)

Table 9. Organisations involved in solidarity projects



Source: Infographics for [2018–2020](#) and [2021–2023](#)

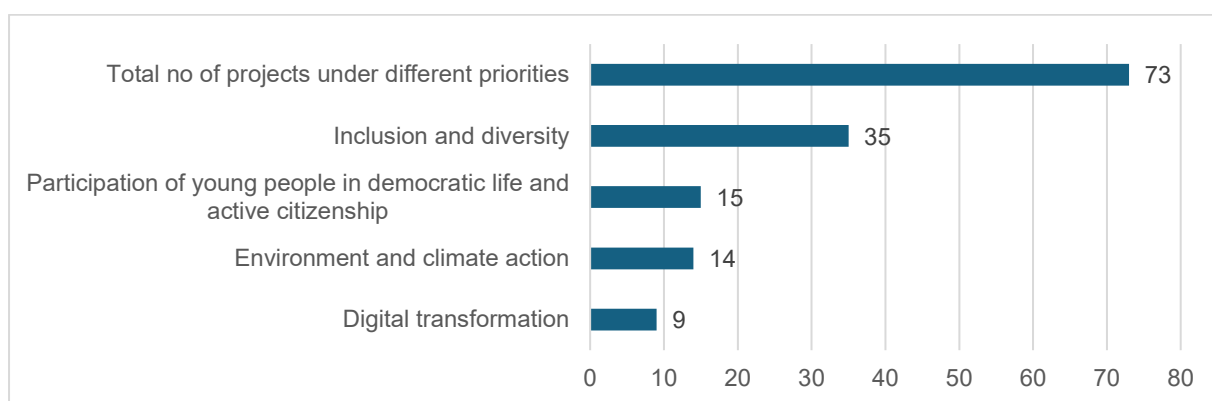


Figure 2. Implementation of programme priorities in supported solidarity projects 2021–2023 (Source: [2021–2023 infographic](#))