

Cooperation with the NEIGHBOURING PARTNER COUNTRIES within Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGES

- 1 Establish a clear framework for youth cooperation between the programme and the neighbouring partner countries, give it an identity and foster a more effective and meaningful approach.
- 2 Keep the essential opportunities for cooperation offered by the current programmes, broaden and strengthen its certain features.
- 3 Enhance and structure communication between different stakeholders of this cooperation.

ABBREVIATIONS used in the document:

EECA is for Eastern Europe and Caucasus comprising 2 neighbouring regions: Eastern Partner Countries (Neighbourhood East) and Russian Federation.

MEDA is for the region of South Mediterranean countries (Neighbourhood South).

SEE is for South East Europe comprising Western Balkan countries.

NPC is for the Neighbouring Partner Countries including all the above mentioned partner regions, so called third countries not associated to the programmes.

E+ is for Erasmus+, in our context in the field of youth.

KA1 is for Key Action 1 of the Erasmus+, the same as **KA2** is for Key Action 2.

CBY is for Capacity Building in the field of Youth.

ESC is for the European Solidarity Corps.

KMST is for Knowledge Management and Staff training

NA is for a National Agency of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps.

EC is for the European Commission.

DG is for the Directorate General.



1

Establish a clear framework for youth cooperation between the programme and the neighbouring partner countries, including specific aims and objectives, and potentially also priorities and budget.

Bring an identity to the cooperation between the programme and the neighbouring partner countries and foster a more effective and meaningful approach.

The current programmes offer various possibilities for cooperation between the programme and the neighbouring partner regions without, however, providing an overall framework and aims that could give more value and meaning to such cooperation.

Under the current programmes, National Agencies have rather high flexibility in spending their budget (mainly under KA1 and ESC) on cooperation with neighbouring partner regions. Past programmes, however, most notably the successful Youth in Action, have placed the cooperation with partner countries in a **more specific framework, which included separate objectives for this cooperation, a clear budget allocation and management.**

Such a framework, which includes **visible allocation of funds as well specific objectives for the cooperation with the neighbouring partner countries, has the potential to increase the transparency, visibility, meaning and impact of this cooperation**, not only in terms of learning opportunities for young people but also in terms of needed development of youth work and youth policies in NPC.

To increase the impact of the programmes, the cooperation between the programme and NPC should be clearly financially recognised and all National Agencies should be encouraged to spend a relevant part of their budget on this cooperation. Any definition of framework or budgetary allocation should, however, provide enough flexibility to respond to National Agencies' specific situations and concerns.

We suggest defining a **minimum level of funds to be allocated** on cooperation between the programme and the partner countries. This approach would also encourage all National Agencies to deal with the cooperation with neighbouring partner regions in a more conscious and active way.

We support the fact that the ESC is open for any quality and relevant projects, without setting any financial limitations for the activities with the partner countries. This approach should be recognised as a good practice and implemented in Erasmus+ youth sector.

If any budgetary allocations or funds limitations should be implemented, it should take into account **balanced projects' impact on all partners**, including a meaningful number of participants and organisations from the neighbouring partner countries.

Projects between the programme and the NPC should have an **identity and relevance also for the neighbouring regions**. Important factors to be considered are priorities and topics addressed that are important not only from the EU perspective, but also for the youth work stakeholders in the neighbouring countries.

Furthermore, a defined framework (in terms of aims, budget, structure etc.) would make it possible to **establish specific success indicators and to measure the impact and success rates** of the cooperation. This could enable the countries involved, as well as the both European youth programmes, to politically capitalise their investments in international youth cooperation. The number of indicators should be limited to key but diverse aspects of the cooperation between the programme and the NPC. Indicators should be connected to established objectives within the framework and could be quantitative as well as qualitative.

2

The essential opportunities for cooperation offered by the current programmes should be kept and certain features should be broadened and enhanced.

The most basic formats of cooperation, like youth exchanges, youth participation projects, international volunteering and mobility of youth workers **should be continued**.

Organisations from the NPC should have a **possibility to take an ownership** with a lead / coordinator role in such simple, grass-root level projects as it enormously contributes to their capacity development. They should be able to apply directly for basic projects granted at the centralised level. National Agencies and SALTOs should be able to influence the objectives and priorities defined for such action.

Cooperation Partnerships should be unconditionally open for participation of the neighbouring partner countries (current restrictions, like *added value* clause should be lifted) as they represent one of the major **tools for enhancing**

structural capacity in youth work and youth policy development and are therefore an important tool for stimulating developments in youth work in Europe and beyond.

At the same time the **Small Scale Partnerships** should be open for participation of the neighbouring partner regions as they allow for involvement of the grassroots and less experienced organisations that **are vital for the development of the youth sector in the neighbouring partner countries**.

We further ask to have possibilities to implement **local projects in the neighbouring partner regions** (like participation activities and solidarity projects), provided such an investment is well defined within the established framework, the projects have a clear link to the European youth programmes and there is proper management and monitoring in place.

TCA/NET activities focusing on cooperation with the NPC should be encouraged and follow a longer-term, strategic perspective allowing to reach in-depth results and to sustain outcomes. National Agencies and SALTO Resource Centres in youth field should be encouraged to include them when defining their TCA/NET objectives and budgets. TCA/NET activities should be open for neighbouring partner countries as default, and only in justified cases the activities should be limited. The development of new partnerships involving new and small organisations should be systematically supported by specific support activities within a long-term networking strategy. We warmly welcome establishment of the *Beyond Borders – Neighbours Together* strategic, long-term NAs and SALTO partnership that largely contributes to this matter.

We suggest looking into possibilities to set up **additional support for neighbouring partner countries that have shown high political interest to cooperate with the EU**, in their access to both European youth programmes, especially if they decide to become programme countries. Collaboration with national ministries and regional SALTOs info centres and contact points in those countries plays a pivotal role. Financial requirements should not interrupt establishing new programme countries and their national agencies, in light of integration of the European youth work sector.

Whenever a visa is required to participate in youth projects of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, the EU consulates should recognise the programmes specificities (esp. inclusion aspect) and offer **facilitated visa procedures or even a specific visa type** (with fast-track, free of charge, etc.).

Finally, our programmes should **be ready to offer specific support** for youth work cooperation with countries that are now quite excluded by different circumstances (wars, political situation, etc.). Such support measures should be established with consultation with the concerned country's youth work stakeholders and other civic organisations.

3

Enhance and structure communication between different stakeholders in supporting this cooperation, in particular National Agencies, SALTOs and the European Commission

Different actors are involved in designing and implementing cooperation with NPC at different levels (different DGs: DG EAC, DG NEAR, and units in the European Commission, EACEA, National Agencies, SALTOs, Erasmus+ offices and EU Delegations in partner countries, etc.).

We ask the European Commission to **provide opportunities for communication in this broader institutional framework in order to share information, build connections and create synergies**, best in regional settings, as they are specific to each neighbouring partner region.

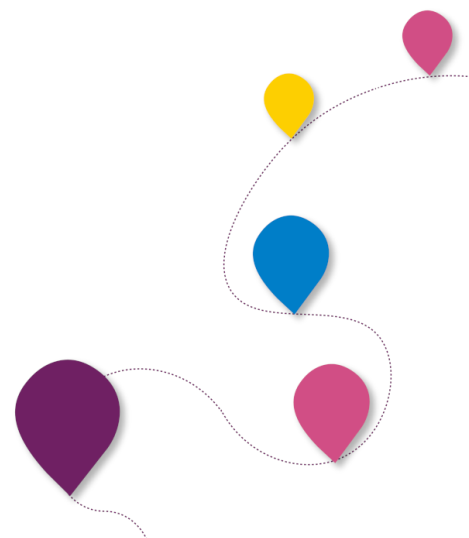
We also see the need to develop regular and transparent communication between the EACEA and National Agencies/SALTOs/European Commission in order to share information about project applications and assessments at centralised and decentralised levels, developments in the regions etc. In particular, we see the need to strengthen the communication between National Agencies, the European Commission, SALTOs and other stakeholders in the field of youth cooperation with neighbouring partner regions. **We welcome establishment of regular consultative staff meetings focusing on cooperation between the programme and the neighbouring partner countries, but we call for involvement of all the National Agencies and the DG EAC.** These meetings are self-organised by the network of National Agencies and SALTOs and have the purpose to review, monitor and guide the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries

in view of developing a strategic approach for this part of the programmes.

Periodically, other stakeholders should be invited to broaden the consultation process (such as organisations, experts, ministries from neighbouring partner countries, other institutions etc.). Guidelines from the consultative meetings should be implemented at different levels, in particular through SALTO work plans, TCA/NET, KMST etc.

To ensure efficient implementation of this process, **a clear mandate for the regional SALTOS is needed**. This mandate could include support by regional SALTOS to NAs in the implementation of monitoring of approved projects taking place in the neighbouring partner regions as well as the implementation of activities within the general plan of KMST for NA staff, including study visits in the partner countries. **The regional SALTOS should be sufficiently invested** not only with budgets relevant to their scope of responsibilities, but also allowing to answer to the needs of international youth work. Their role should be recognised as knowledge centres with advanced expertise in the field for over 20 years now.

National Agencies should nominate (a) **contact officer / officers** for the topic of cooperation between the programme and the neighbouring partner countries.



KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

Statistics for cooperation with the NPC collected for 2014-2017¹ deepened in EECA region by statistical analysis of previous programming period 2014-2020² as well as feedback received from organisations from EECA and SEE during consultations in 2021³ suggest that:

Cooperation with the Partner regions has been stagnating.



Organisations from NPC have been facing difficulties using the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes and find it increasingly difficult to find partners, thus also receive financial support for projects. The number of youth projects with the neighbouring partner countries is either dropping down or stagnating (esp. the projects hosted in the neighbouring regions). The development trend is opposite to the fast growing numbers observed in Youth in Action 2007-2013.

There is generally less interest among organisations in Programme countries in cooperation with neighbouring partner countries.



Nowadays, it seems that many youth organisations from EU countries do not see or understand any reason for cooperating particularly with partners from the EU neighbourhood. Different limitations for the cooperation with the neighbouring regions (like KA1 25% budget limit, added value requirement for access in KA2 Cooperation Partnerships, continuous changes in KA2 Capacity building in the field of youth etc.) as well as bureaucratic difficulties related to visa regimes and/or residence permits further demotivate EU organisations from cooperation.

The structural framework of stakeholders responsible for youth cooperation with neighbouring partner countries is complex.



Several EC Directorates and structures are directly involved in supporting youth cooperation with or in neighbouring partner countries: different units in DG Education and Culture (EAC), DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR; for instance with their EU4Youth programme), the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the National Agencies, SALTOs etc. In the neighbouring regions,

¹ <https://www.salto-youth.net/download/3875>

² www.salto-youth.net/EECA_stats

³ Consultations held in mid-2021 in EECA and SEE regions, internal report available

National Erasmus+ Offices as well as External Action Service / EU Delegations (for instance with their Youth Ambassadors initiative and Youth Action Plan) play a role. All this diverse constellation is usually not clearly understood by the youth work stakeholders in the neighbouring countries.

The fragmented approach in the European youth programmes is ineffective.



E+ KA1 opportunities play a key role in development of international youth cooperation complemented by volunteering opportunities of the European Solidarity Corps. Both opportunities are not indicating any specific aims nor priorities for cooperation with the neighbouring partner countries. On the other hand, the KA2 CBY offers opportunities according to very specific aims and frameworks. This means that the approach taken under CBY is not only different but also inconsistent with the rather general approach taken by the other parts of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.

GREAT POTENTIAL

Experience gained by the regional SALTOS since 2000 as well as the experience of National Agencies, especially since 2003 when the cooperation with the partner countries had been decentralised, as well as various surveys including first findings of the 2023-2024 RAY study on cooperation with NPC⁴ have shown that:

The European youth programmes have an impact on both, the neighbouring partner regions and the programmes countries. The cooperation with the NPC contributes to the development of key issues that are of importance for young people, youth work and youth policy all around Europe and beyond. This cooperation also contributes to the development of communities and the relations between the European Union and its neighbouring countries. A focus on the neighbouring regions enhances the impact of the programmes and creates more spaces for dialogue and cooperation based on mutual needs and interests.

⁴ First findings of this RAY research are available internally, the public report is expected to follow in second part of 2024.

European youth programmes represent important tools for youth work development in the partner regions. In most of the NPC the programmes are unique tools for the organisations to experiment with non-formal learning, to build young people's and youth workers' competencies, to foster intercultural learning, to increase their level of awareness about Europe and to include youth with fewer opportunities into their work. The ESC Quality Label provides opportunities for small NGOs to be recognised on an international level and to gain access to specific training. The programmes have been the engines for creating new networks, training youth workers and trainers and increasing the recognition of youth work.

At the same time, the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries offers an added value and dimension for the organisations based in the programme countries. Partnerships and projects involving partners from the neighbouring regions foster intercultural learning, awareness and respect of pluralism and diversity, critical thinking as well as a stronger interest in democratic citizenship and human rights issues. This is due to cultural differences and/or a particular interest in the political dimension of youth cooperation, as these projects tend to address many issues that are currently discussed in our societies. Finally, an external view on the EU contributes to raising youth workers' and young people's awareness of the specificities as well as the recognition of the benefits offered by the EU.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Initially, the NAs directors at the Business Meeting held in Helsinki, 8-11 October 2019, discussed the outcomes and proposals made by the Consultative Meeting on cooperation with the NPC, which took place in Ljubljana, 19 - 20 September 2019. The network welcomed the outcomes of the consultative meeting and adopted the document with recommendations that had been presented to the DG EAC in autumn 2019.

During the NAs and SALTO Staff Meeting in Tbilisi, 20-22 February 2024, the document had been revised and edited as most of the challenges still remain as a structural obstacle in both European youth programmes to develop cooperation with the neighbouring partner countries further. The recommendations had been updated and remain actual.

