

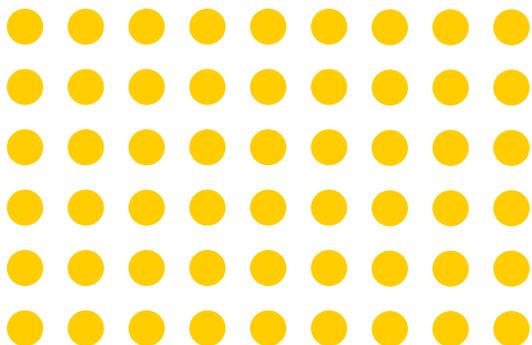
Solidarity within the European Solidarity Corps





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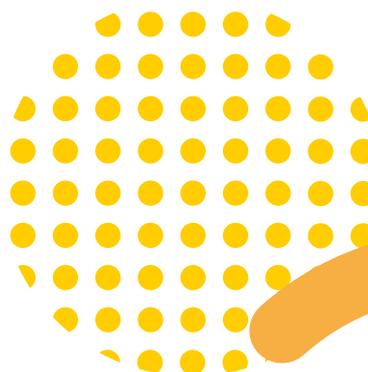


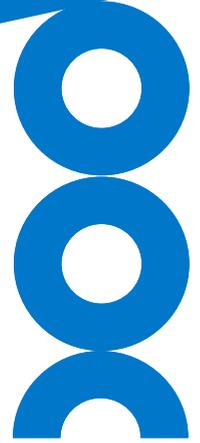
ABSTRACT

Since the launch of the European Solidarity Corps programme, the issue of the solidarity dimension of mobility activities has been debated by the different stakeholders of the programme. The first question asked was: “Are the voluntary activities in the European Solidarity Corps and EVS the same?”.

However the topic and the content (tasks) of a voluntary activity embody a core feature of its solidarity dimension. The concept of Solidarity within the European Solidarity Corps cannot be only considered through the content or the topic of the activities realised by the volunteers.

Solidarity has to be considered through a holistic approach. That means that the local context and the process of the project have to be considered as well as the relations between the stakeholders of a European Solidarity Corps voluntary activity: the participant, the receiving organisation and the local community. This paper has to be considered as the personal contribution of a practitioner to a wider question of the solidarity dimension in the European Solidarity Corps.





Is the European Solidarity Corps really different from EVS?

In September 2016, after the speech of Mr Juncker on the state of the European Union, there were a lot of youth workers and mobility programme managers who were wondering what the idea was behind the European Solidarity Corps. Would it be something more than EVS or just a change of name? Another question was “why do they create something that already exists?” I remember that I was interviewed by a team of consultants in policy making at the end of the experimental period of the European Solidarity Corps. I had this feeling that we were not talking about the same subject. They were asking questions about European Solidarity Corps as if it was something that had been well defined for years, while I was still wondering what this new programme was. Nowadays, the confusion is still present. Young people, like many organisations, are still using the term ‘EVS’. The question of similarity between the two programmes is still relevant. However, the debate should focus on the necessity and the way to renew the European volunteering programme in a stronger solidarity dimension.

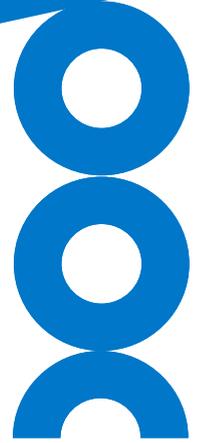
EVS within the Youth in Action and Erasmus+ programmes strived to strengthen the learning dimension and its recognition of the volunteering activity. These efforts and the inclusion of EVS in the Erasmus+ programme may have rather strengthened the feeling that EVS was a mobility

programme like other programmes. The European Solidarity Corps highlights the notion of solidarity and represents an opportunity to rethink transnational volunteering activities from a global dimension.

Solidarity as a new spur

As mentioned above, since the launch of the European Solidarity Corps programme in 2018, the issue of the solidarity dimension of mobility activities is being debated between the different stakeholders of the programme. One of the first questions that emerged when the European Solidarity Corps was first introduced was: “Are the voluntary activities in the European Solidarity Corp and EVS the same?”. At first sight, someone working as a manager of European mobility projects would answer that there is no specific difference. The implementation of the activities (project cycle management), financial issues and requirements are almost the same. These features have evolved like those of all the mobility actions of the Erasmus+ programme. Finally EVS was phased out, which was a benefit to the European Solidarity Corps programme. “Le Roi est mort, Vive le Roi!” This was the sentence that was proclaimed at the death of a King and meant the continuity of the regime despite the death of the King. We could reuse it: “EVS is over! Welcome European Solidarity Corps”. The programme guide states that the European Solidarity Corps is “built on the achievements of more than 25 years of



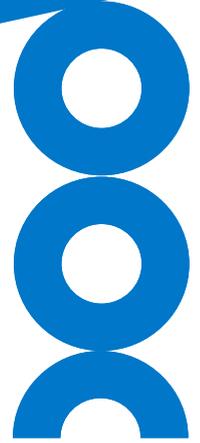


European programmes in the field of youth and solidarity, especially on the success of the European Voluntary Service..." (European Commission 2020. p5). On the same page, before this statement, the guide also reaffirms that "The European Union is built on solidarity, a shared value which is strongly felt throughout European society. Solidarity defines the European project and provides the necessary unity to cope with current and future crises by holding a strong moral ground." (European Commission 2020. p5). This is coherent with the fact that solidarity is one of the values mentioned as prevailing to the Member States in Article 2 of the Preamble of the Treaty of Lisbon.

While the value of solidarity was inherent to the EVS programme, the word solidarity only appeared three times in the Erasmus+ programme guide for 2016. It was considered as one of the specific objectives of Erasmus+ in the field of youth, in the same way as active citizenship, intercultural dialogue or social inclusion (European Commission 2016. p28). The European Solidarity Corps, among the various objectives of the voluntary programme, has given priority to "solidarity". Therefore, this change of priority among the objectives has to be fulfilled by the organisations that implement voluntary activities through the European Solidarity Corps programme.

The European Solidarity Corps programme guide provides few indications on the concept of Solidarity as promoted by the European Union, despite it asking that the voluntary activities promote this value. Presented as a value, it appears subjective in the way a value is personal and usually found in the cultural and educational background of each of us. The guide indicates a number of fields of activities: "Volunteering can take place in a broad range of areas, such as in the fields of environmental protection, climate change mitigation and greater social inclusion. It does not include activities that are part of curricula in formal education, vocational education and training systems and activities for emergency response..." (European Commission 2020. p23). However, the range of topics that you can tick when you apply for the European Solidarity Corps is much more broad. Furthermore, many of the category titles are not instinctively linked to solidarity. For instance, "agriculture, forestry and fisheries" and "employability and entrepreneurship". Both of these examples give the impression that they are more in line with economic development. Then there is, "research and innovation" which seems equally out of the solidarity field or "community development" and "rural development", fields that potentially cover so many issues. The final example is, "European identity and values", in this instance it is easier to see a connection to the concept of solidarity. For some, the guide and the application forms bring more confusion than clarity about the concept of Solidarity.





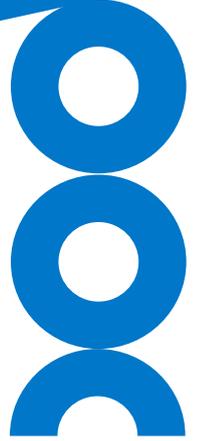
With such a broad range of topics, it appears obvious that the solidarity dimension of the voluntary activities must be bigger than the opted for topic.^[1] Whatever the activity, it is possible to tick one of the topics and, then claim it is clearly in line with the principles of solidarity. All organisations can show that they are eligible, if only because they are active in one or several of the topics listed in the webform.

Whether or not a topic can encompass the solidarity character of a voluntary activity, it is necessary to reflect on the concept of solidarity and interpret it through all the stages of the European Solidarity Corps activity. In other words rethinking the project cycle of a voluntary service from the definition of the tasks up to the valorisation of the results; having a look at each milestone of the project with a magnifying glass called “solidarity”. This does not mean that all the quality aspects of a mobility experience developed during the EVS programme should be swept aside. Indeed, a lot of quality aspects for the support of volunteers have been developed, especially in the field of intercultural learning^[2] and skills development recognition^[3]. The “solidarity” priority of the programme brings an opportunity to further improve on the quality of the voluntary activities as they were improved during the life of the EVS programme.

The “4Thought for Solidarity” research pointed out how everyone can have their own representation and definition of the word “Solidarity”. It has many different concepts and the 4Thought study identified four of them as cornerstones: Empathy, Human Rights, Active Citizenship and Inclusion. The study points out that the word “solidarity” can refer to a specific relationship between individuals. The Oxford dictionary uses the concepts of “unity” and “mutual support”. The definition provided by Emile Durkheim highlights that, “values, beliefs, cultural norms and relationships [...] transcends individualistic and atomistic attitudes or hierarchical structures in a society” (Bacliija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020. pp20-22).

These basic references allow us to clarify how the solidarity dimension of the European Solidarity Corps programme can be put into practice. Solidarity has to be considered through a holistic approach. That means that the local context and the process of the project have to be considered as well as the relations between the stakeholders of a European Solidarity Corps voluntary activity: the participant, the receiving organisation and the local community. The term, ‘local community’ should be used rather than “target group” or “beneficiary” which are too reductive. The supporting organisations (whatever their role, sending or coordinating) also have their role to play in the different stages of the voluntary activity. A reading of these interactions can be done for the six key milestones in the life of a voluntary project, these are: Definition of





the societal need and the voluntary activity; Selection process; Preparation of the volunteer; Training and support; Competence development and their recognition; and Valorisation of the project.

Defining the needs

The voluntary activity has to rely on the right analysis of the societal need and the role that the volunteer will have in the activity that has been designed to respond to this need. The simple support by a volunteer to the regular activities of an organisation is not enough, it has to be clearly connected to the local community. The voluntary activity also cannot be an activity entirely separated from the organisation. Feedback from some young people during or after their voluntary activity has pointed out the difficulty many have in finding a good balance. Moreover, the balance has to be found taking into account the expectations of the volunteer too. Failure to do this can be the cause for the loss of motivation.

Because of the fear of "job substitution", you can find many descriptions of volunteering activities disconnected from the regular activities of the organisation. Some of them propose only tasks of communication and social networking management. Another argument that can lead to difficult situations related to the volunteer role definition, is the argument that it is a learning process based on the personal initiative of the volunteers to justify a

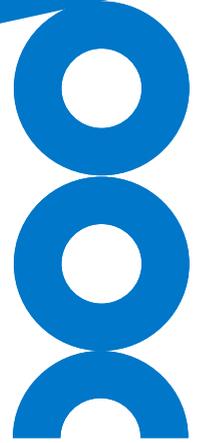
fully specific role for themselves. During feedback sessions, some volunteers have said that they did not understand why they were there.

In order to reinforce the shared values, concerns, beliefs or cultural norms, and reinforce the ties between the community and respond to the identified needs, the activity has to be closely connected to the community. This connection should even allow for physical meetings. For example, the work of NGOs on social networks, working to prevent fake news or bullying, is largely done online, however, to be really effective the work should also be connected to the actual community, with physical meetings.

Defining the societal need is highly important for the stage of the selection process too. A lot of organisations run their activities day after day because they have to. We are all working in a rush and developing new projects all year long. It is necessary to take the time to think about the relevance of the activity as well as the aim of the organisation. As it has been detailed, the purpose of the organisation is bigger than the voluntary opportunity.

A candidate who has understood the purpose of the organisation and expressed it during the selection process, demonstrates already some understanding of your organisation and the local community. For instance, as a worker in a Youth Information Centre and in charge of European Solidarity Corps, when we receive the applications of

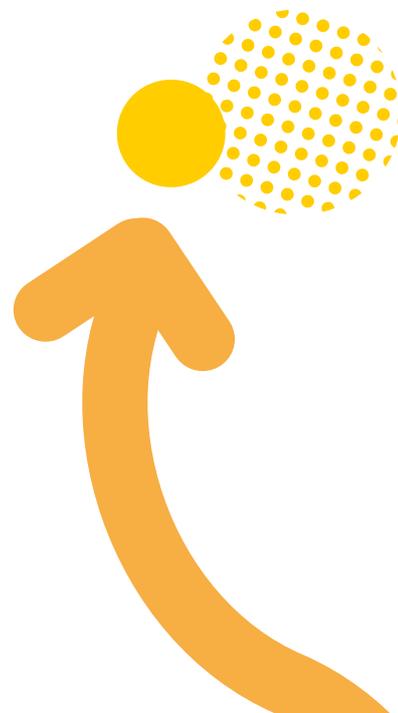


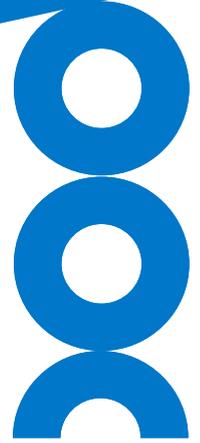


the candidates, I do not pay great attention to their understanding of the tasks. I rather read carefully their understanding of the purpose of our organisation.

Numerous young people are interested in working with multimedia tools (video editing and social media content) that the activities in our organisation offers. Nevertheless, the purpose of the organisation is not creating media content. It is related to the empowerment of young people, offering them useful information to create their path to self dependency and to become active citizens. It is obvious that we cannot expect that all the potential volunteers will be able to express in detail the purpose of our organisation and the societal need that the project intends to tackle. Most of the candidates will explain their motivation in a general way. Therefore, the host organisation should identify in advance some keywords that the candidate could express and questions that can facilitate this expression. The identification of the purpose of the organisation and its solidarity dimension in the local community, has to take into account the distance and cultural differences between the organisation and the candidate. However, even if the future volunteer really shares the concerns and social objective of the host organisation, they will probably still not be able to grasp the local context and the cultural specificities.

The selection process is, then, a stage where the future volunteer should already receive a clear explanation of the social objective in the local context. The selection process is a time for each actor, the organisation and the volunteer, to get the needed information. Apart from the practical arrangement questions, the potential volunteer also needs the tasks description so they can confirm if they want the engagement and it is a time for the organisation to decide whether they believe the potential volunteer fits with the organisation. It is a two way exchange of information.





Solidarity Throughout the Project Cycle

The selection process represents a short time in comparison with the other stages. It is therefore appropriate to stay realistic. The volunteer will not integrate all the information and concepts with the reading of an infopack or during an online meeting. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the local context represents a local reality of a global issue. This goes back to the European dimension of solidarity. The preparation of the volunteer should then be reshaped to include solidarity awareness.

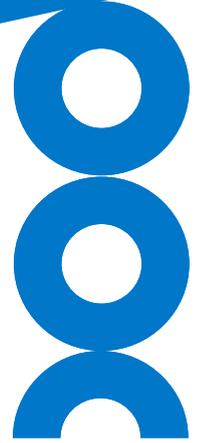
The recommended preparation that was provided by the supporting (sending) organisations under the EVS programme consisted of eight sequences (SALTO 2014):

1. Concept of EVS and its place in the Erasmus+ programme;
2. Organisation of EVS programme;
3. Expectations from EVS;
4. Share of motivation, expectations, fears, goals for learning;
5. Practical and technical information (visa, status of volunteer, insurance, EVS agreement...);
6. Intercultural learning;
7. Guidance on crisis management;
8. Youthpass.

Solidarity can be introduced in the first sequence in the same way that EVS was presented as a concept. Nevertheless, learning about solidarity should be introduced in its own sequence as intercultural learning was. Some methods to lead this sequence have already been proposed in the The 4Thought for Solidarity research (Bacliija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020. pp16-18). A collective work for the elaboration of a tool kit about solidarity learning should be a second stage as well as the support of the youth workers to develop new tools. The same path as the one followed about intercultural learning can be walked here.

The training and evaluation cycle in general (the on-arrival training and mid-term evaluation) have to integrate this change. Workshops about solidarity have to find their place beside those on intercultural learning or learning objectives. If you take support and training in its globality, for all the stakeholders, the training sessions provided for mentors or tutors should be also affected. These persons who support the volunteer closely in their daily life and at work have to integrate it into their support processes. It is important that the local needs are explained, the situation of the target group is described, questions are regularly asked to the volunteer about their impressions of the issues they are working with and the activities that they are implementing.





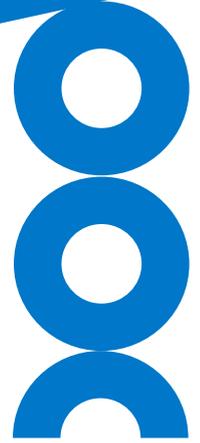
The development of skills with an objective of facilitating the entry on the labour market stays as one of the objectives of the European Solidarity Corps programme as it was for EVS. It is remarkable that the description of the objectives establishes a cause and effect link between active citizenship and employment^[4]. The mobility programmes proved and convinced most of the actors of the labour market, namely the potential recruiters, of the relevance of the gaining of soft skills through an experience of mobility (European Commission 2017). Flexibility, the capacity to adapt to a new situation, the capacity to solve issues or develop self-confidence are often those that are promoted. The skills related with the sense of solidarity would deserve to be more specifically studied and promoted. Empathy is one of them. After a short time spent on the social network “LinkedIn”, everyone will read several expressions of Empathy as a key skill for managers. Studies prove a strong link between “Empathy” and leadership or job-performance (Gentry, Weber and Sadri 2016). In any case, the skills related to “solidarity” should be analysed with volunteers during the evaluation period of their voluntary experience. This analysis would be accompanied by a discussion on how to continue using them after the voluntary period. The Youthpass appears as an adapted and already existing tool to support this process.

The valorisation of the project is closely related to the skills development in the different mobility programmes. In formal education or in vocational

training centres, ceremonies for the presentation of Europass are organised. They are valorisation activities that become a must done activity. Interviews and testimonials focus on the learning achievements too and it makes sense because the learning of competences is the core of the activity.

If we come back to the initial part of this paper, the European Solidarity Corps voluntary activity is based on an analysis of societal need that has to be tackled in a common action between the volunteer and the organisation. Then, the valorisation of the project can focus on a result that could be summarised as “What positive change have we achieved?” and “How have we carried it out together?” These questions have to be evaluated with a methodology planned in advance.



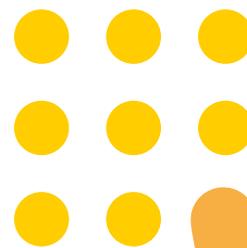


Conclusion

As a conclusion, we can see how a change of the priority order can lead to a new perception of a mobility programme that we thought really accomplished. The change is not limited to the name of the programme to satisfy a communication policy. Some fundamental concepts and documents can lead to a dialectical reflection about the European Solidarity Corps project management. This article is a personal reflection of a practitioner and should be understood as a contribution to a common reflection; as food for thought to go further to make it more concrete.

All the achievements and quality aspects of EVS have to be kept. It would be a shame to cease to use volunteering as a great tool of intercultural learning. The improvements made in the recognition of learning was equally a real step forward, namely thanks to the Youthpass. The change of priority order brings the opportunity to improve our practice. It is also an opportunity to pay better attention to the real meaning of solidarity and volunteering. The increase of the budget and the fact that EVS was integrated into the Erasmus+ programme in 2014 may have pushed the loss of a part of the solidarity meaning of this programme. It became a mobility programme like internships in a non-profit sector. It appears more and more important to re-centre the programme onto a solidarity dimension of volunteering. The fun-

damental role for the supporting organisations (sending and coordinating) has been slightly lost within the European Solidarity Corps programme since 2018. The different roles the organisations have in a voluntary activity should be reaffirmed in the next programme 2021-2027. The gathering of the sending and coordinating organisations under the same role of supporting organisations led to confusion. These last months, I received numerous applications of volunteers who did not know that they should be supported by a sending organisation and they did not understand the relevance of this support. These situations are going in the opposite direction of what the change of programme with its change of priority should lead to.





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[1] The topics proposed to the young people when they register in the European Solidarity Corps portal or those when an organisation issues an offer on the portal are slightly different. The difference does not change the argument.

[2] Knowledge on intercultural learning that you can find in the Intercultural Learning T-Kit issued on this topic by the Council of Europe were massively and systematically transferred to youth workers and young people involved in EVS activities.

[3] With the Youth in Action Programme (2007-2013), Youthpass was developed as a tool for the recognition of non-formal education experiences and the competences acquired and developed during an experience in the Youth in Action Programme.

[4] “[...] Non-formal and informal learning enable young people to acquire essential competences that contribute to their personal and socio-educational development and foster their active participation in society, thereby improving their employment prospects. [...]” (European Commission 2020. p7).

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EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

This article is part of “Europe talks Solidarity” – a series of events and publications that offers a platform for the exploration of the concept of Solidarity, initiated by the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre (www.salto-youth.net/rc/solidarity). The discussion on Solidarity benefits from inputs from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. However, the opinions and views expressed in the articles in this series do not necessarily reflect those of the Resource Centre.

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