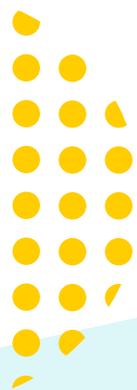
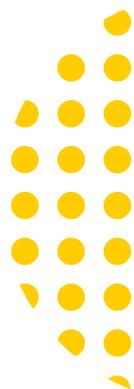
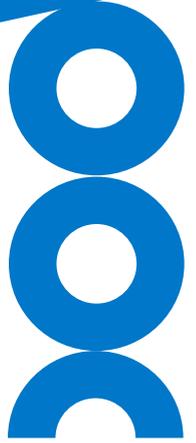




# Solidarity-based solutions to the increasing vulnerability of young people in Europe:

youth work, employability and active citizenship



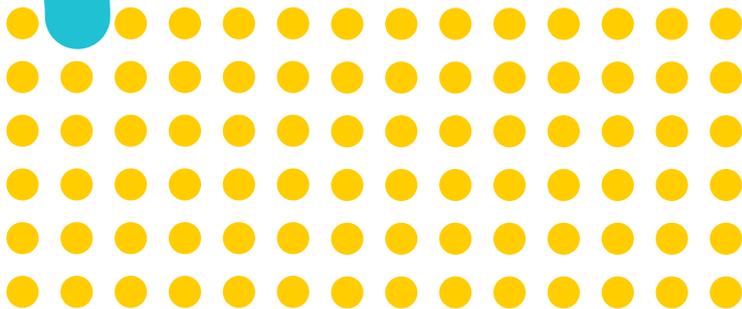


## Marina Codorniu Matas

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My name is Marina Codorniu and I am passionate about life, society and The Earth. That is why I studied Geography at the University of Barcelona. After a long time being a volunteer for different NGOs, I became a freelance trainer, facilitator, coach and project manager. I collaborate with diverse organizations designing and managing projects as well as delivering training courses and facilitating all over Europe and the North of Africa. My life purpose is to contribute to improving the wellness of living beings through my job and daily actions.

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## ABSTRACT

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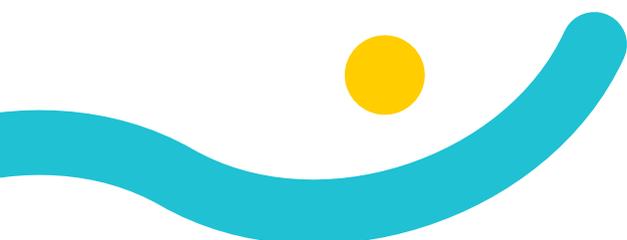
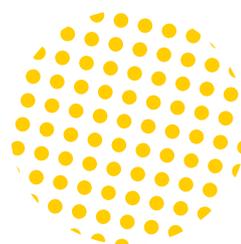
The condition of young people in the European Union is a cause of great concern. Challenges such as youth unemployment or low participation of young people in the democratic life are already being tackled by the EU and civil society. This is to try and improve the welfare of this social group, which is becoming more vulnerable during crises such as COVID-19.

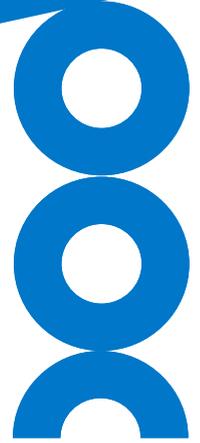
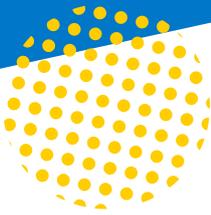
These critical situations are likely to provoke extensive consequences on the economic welfare of young people (high unemployment, low-quality jobs, etc.), as well as on their psychological and social well-being, especially among the most vulnerable.

But what is the role that solidarity plays in this context?

Solidarity can support the improvement of the quality of life of young people. Therefore this paper will explore the current status of young people in Europe and present opportunities, challenges and possible solutions that youth work, active citizenship and employability can provide to promote solidarity.

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## Introduction

This paper aims to help its audience to reflect, gain knowledge and be inspired to support young people by focusing on the link between solidarity, employability, active citizenship and youth work.

The paper illustrates how the concept of *Solidarity* is perceived, using as a starting point the 4Thought research of the European Solidarity Corps (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020). Then, the current needs of young people and their situation in the European Union are analysed.

The previously mentioned sections finally serve as the base to delve into the opportunities, challenges and possible solutions that youth work, active citizenship and employability can offer to promote solidarity and increase the quality of life of young people. The observations exposed in this regard are the result of thorough reflection and analysis by the author with the aim to open the readers minds and invite them to contribute to the solidarity debate.

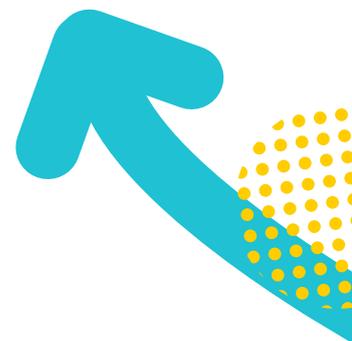
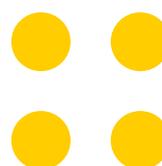
## 1. How does the paper understand the concept of Solidarity?

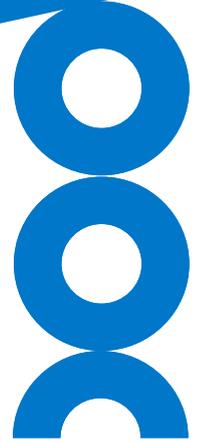
Solidarity is not a concept our societies are very familiar with. It is however, one of the core values of the European Union and European programmes (i.e. European Solidarity Corps). The definition of this term is still unclear, solidarity can mean somet-

hing different for each individual. It is important to clarify how this paper understands the concept.

According to the 4Thought for Solidarity research; *“no overt legal framing of the concept has been agreed [...] Yet, there is still something within Solidarity that encourages togetherness and increases unity”* (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020 p51).

This paper, in agreement with the research, understands solidarity as being an essential value for the building of a united society in which individuals support and care for each other. The fact of thinking that humans need to be *solidaire* is a subjective belief and that is why it is so difficult to find a common definition for this concept. Yet, it is a very powerful one that when implemented can cause immense benefits; *“Solidarity provides social cohesion, strengthens communities and the sense of belonging, builds social relationships and encourages shared values and kinship.”* (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020 p47).





If we are to implement solidarity, one of our goals has to be to turn this value into real behaviours and actions (i.e. volunteering, Solidarity Projects, etc.) to which the maximum number of citizens can contribute. Solidarity can become part of the citizens' daily lives and for that, we need to promote lifelong solidarity engagement.

Moreover, the 4Thought research explains that the four main cornerstones used to define Solidarity are: *Empathy, Human Rights, Active Citizenship and Inclusion*. Young people in the survey particularly emphasised *Empathy* and *Inclusion*. Thus, to reach young people and support them into getting involved in solidarity initiatives, these two concepts have to be exposed as remarkable values that can be applied through those initiatives.

This paper aims to explore how tools such as youth work, active citizenship and employability can foster solidarity among young people. The paper sees solidarity as a value that we need to bring into action from the individual to the societal level. Solidarity actions promote empathetic and inclusive behaviours and, through these actions, we aim to improve the quality of life of citizens by creating a caring environment.



## 2. The needs of young people and their current situation in the EU

Before diving into the opportunities, challenges and possible solutions that youth work, active citizenship and employability can offer to promote solidarity and increase the quality of life of young people. It is vital to understand the current situation, characteristics and needs of young people in Europe so that we can better know how to approach them.

In this section I will look into some of young people's needs to which youth work, active citizenship and employability are related and can contribute. These will cover education, employment and participation. Also, I will connect them to solidarity.

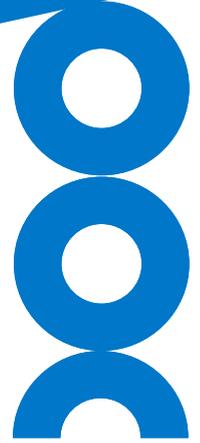
According to the European Commission, young Europeans' lives are improving but some challenges persist (European Commission 2018).

### 2.1. Education

Education is one of the most important needs of young people. It is vital to guarantee that young people can enter the labour market with as much ease as possible. Additionally, education is strongly connected to youth work and can play a very important role in promoting solidarity as we will see further on.

Young people are educated to an increasingly higher level. The proportion of young Europeans who





have attained at least upper secondary level qualifications has risen, as well as the proportion with tertiary degrees. The proportion of early school leavers has generally declined (European Commission 2019<sup>[1]</sup>). Still, some groups of young people encounter difficulties in educational achievement (European Commission 2018<sup>[2]</sup>).

On the other hand, only 14,1% of the total of the youth population participated in non-formal education and training in 2019, however, it should be noted that this number is much higher than it was in 2008 (8,2%) (European Commission 2019). It is clear that non-formal education is gaining recognition and young people are raising their interest in the possibilities that it can offer, although the current percentage still needs to increase.

Youth work and the European Solidarity Corps play a key role in this field and can offer young people what they might not be able to get so easily from formal education: traineeships, soft skills, entrepreneurial skills... and through them, values such as solidarity can be promoted as we will see in the following pages.

Across Europe the unemployment rate is higher for those with the lowest levels of education than for those who attained tertiary education (European

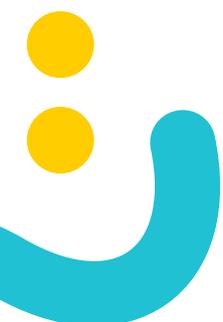
Commission 2018). It becomes apparent that the structure of education and training systems is a key factor behind successful youth labour market integration (Müller and Gangl 2003). There is a positive relationship between higher levels of education and employment in most European countries.

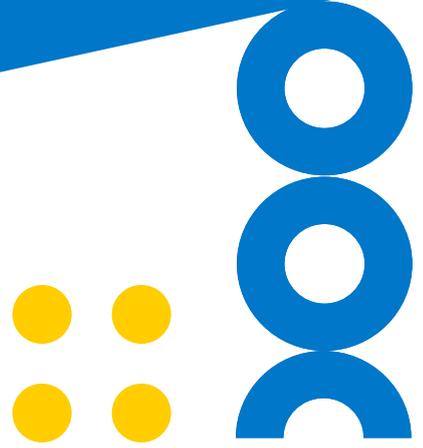
## 2.2. Employment

As reported by the European Commission (2018) research, more young people are finding employment in recent years. This is not only improving their financial situation and their general welfare but also contributing to raising the level of social inclusion (one of the basic cornerstones of solidarity according to the 4Thought research). Entering the job market often coincides with assuming new responsibilities in terms of sustaining the cost of living independently. Having better opportunities for finding gainful employment strengthens young people's ability to secure better social and living conditions.

Better education and employment conditions can result in better inclusion. But, in the same way, worse employment conditions can result in greater exclusion.

For instance, vulnerable young people from eastern and southern Europe face comparatively bigger challenges in terms of education, employment<sup>[3]</sup> and, as a consequence, inclusion<sup>[4]</sup> (European Commission 2019). Differences between EU countries reflect how economic, political and social factors





influence the lives of young people and promote differences between the opportunities they might find in their respective countries. The high access to education, training and welfare in some countries, allows young people to be seen as a transformation actor, whereas in other countries the participation of young people in the democratic life is driven by need and lack of opportunities (Bendit and Hahn 2008).

Besides, the quality of jobs and the possibility to find full-time employment is also an obstacle in the EU. Young people represent 35,5% of the total number of temporary employees and 22,4% of the part-time ones (European Commissions 2019<sup>[5]</sup>). The main reasons for the part-time employment of young people is firstly education and secondly not being able to find a full-time job.

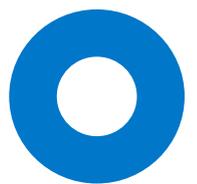
Young people, and especially vulnerable young people, have a clear need for more and better-quality jobs (Halabisky 2012<sup>[6]</sup>). Also, they face difficulties in taking the first steps towards gaining employment, which reflects the need for stakeholder collaboration towards future policy investment, as well as strategy implementation and integration (Connell, Dhakal and Burgess 2018).

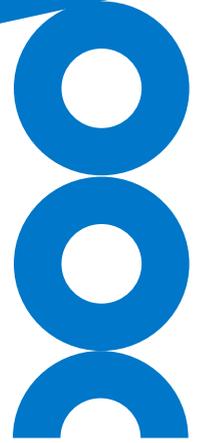
The European Solidarity Corps might offer good possibilities for improving the employment conditions of young people, as well as promoting solidarity through it, as we will discover through Chapter 3.

### 2.3. Youth participation

It is true that although electoral turnout amongst young Europeans continues to decline, their interest in politics increases and they are taking advantage of new methods of participation offered by technology (social media, blogs, etc.). Participation in voluntary activities also shows a remarkable expansion and every year more young people get involved in voluntary organisations. The improved education and employment conditions, as well as progress in social inclusion, are not only contributing to the young people's well-being but also arousing their interest in political and civic issues, motivating them to engage with society (European Commission 2018).

Participating and engaging in democratic life is one of the most visible ways through which young people can express their interests and contribute to a more *solidaire* society. But for becoming active citizens and caring about the positive development of their communities, they first need to have their awareness raised on values such as empathy, inclusion and solidarity. Education is highly important in this matter. The general increase in participation rates in Europe can be at least partly explained by the progressive increase in the number of young people in education. Research has long since detected a positive relationship between the levels of participation in education and the propensity towards volunteering.





Nevertheless, research has also shown that the deterioration in labour market opportunities can be a powerful factor in prompting more young people to get involved in volunteering as this can help them to acquire skills and experience. It is also true that young people are the most active in these kinds of activities when they are between 15 and 19 years of age and are full-time students. Once they start to combine studying with working, and even more so when they are in full-time employment, the time they have available to join non-profit initiatives tends to decrease (European Commission 2018).

Therefore, although there is a positive relationship between better and more education and an increase in volunteering, it is not the same with better employment conditions. When young people get better jobs, they have less time to engage in volunteering and solidarity activities.

### **3. Opportunities, challenges and possible solutions: youth work, active citizenship and employability.**

Now that the current situation and needs of young people have been exposed, we can attempt to explore how to cover those needs and improve their quality of life while promoting solidarity. To achieve this goal, I will delve into the opportunities to embrace, challenges to overcome, and possi-

ble solutions that youth work, active citizenship and employability can offer. These will be related to European projects and the European Solidarity Corps.

#### **3.1. Youth work and active citizenship**

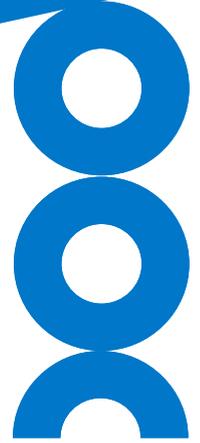
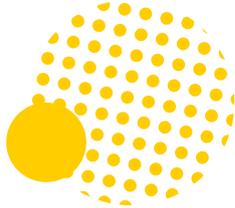
Youth work is a primary channel of youth participation and engagement. It is understood as a series of principles, practices and methods which enable young people to boost their personal, social and educational development, building positive futures for themselves and others. Youth work often promotes volunteering too.

Active citizenship refers to people getting involved in their communities and democracy at all levels: from local to international. Active citizens promote the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political actions, developing a combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make a difference in society.

Youth work and active citizenship are strongly connected. Generally, one of the objectives of youth work is to boost active citizenship among young people. Hence, I will further explore these two fields together.

Youth work already provides many opportunities to young people in terms of enhancing their competences, supporting their inclusion, fostering their employability and promoting solidarity. The promotion of values such as inclusion, empathy





and solidarity, as well as the promotion of active citizenship, is implicit in the mission and goals of many youth organisations. Therefore, most of the activities they conduct have this ultimate aim and so contribute to young people's well-being.

Youth work activities, initiatives and projects normally use non-formal and informal education methods that allow young people to enhance their competences. Hence, they contribute to increasing the participation of young people in education, which as seen in Chapter 2, can increase their chances for better job opportunities. In addition, the skills that are usually learnt in these kinds of activities are complementary to the ones learnt in formal education environments (e.g. entrepreneurial skills, leadership, communication, etc.) which also add to a young persons' CV.

Last but not least, those youth work initiatives promoting solidarity are already encouraging young people to apply solidarity in their daily lives and their communities, fostering their engagement in active citizenship.

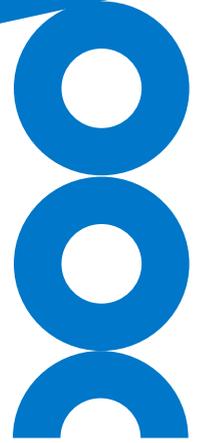
An example of this can be a young person using their gained competences in a project activity to support other young people. Let's say that, for instance, a young person attends a training course in which they gain conflict management skills.

When the young person comes back home after completing the activity, they start applying these new skills in solving a conflict between two groups in the community. In this way, young people are performing a solidarity action and at the same time, they are boosting their active citizenship by enhancing the welfare of their community.

Thus, active citizenship can directly foster the ability of young people to be *solidaire*. When being active citizens, they are bringing their values into action and making them become visible behaviours. This is a very important point: many citizens might recognise the need for solidarity, inclusion or empathy, but they might not actively try to apply any of it in their daily lives. Becoming an active citizen is when someone attempts to make a true difference in their community.

Besides the mentioned opportunities, youth work also faces some challenges when intending to promote solidarity and the welfare of young people. One of the challenges comes when wishing to increase the number of young people participating in non-formal education and other youth work initiatives. This includes vulnerable young people, a target group that needs their education opportunities boosting, in order to achieve better employment conditions. In 2019 only 14,1% of young people got involved in non-formal education and although the percentage seems to be increasing, local action could boost participation in this field.





Some European Solidarity Corps activities such as Jobs and Traineeships already try to encourage this approach by offering the possibility to find opportunities in the country of residence. Yet, much more support is needed. An increase in local support could help to overcome financial or communication barriers. This would allow the programmes to focus on attaining a bigger local impact and so increase the chances to reach young people more effectively. Especially vulnerable groups, raising their interest in participating in volunteering and youth work projects.

An example can be that of a young person who encounters difficulties to participate in solidarity activities because of financial and language barriers: although the programme might support their participation, it does not provide financial or social support to the family. This can prevent the young person from getting involved in the activity. For instance, they might need to stay at home and take care of their relatives. They may also lack confidence in communicating in English (as most European projects require) and so decline to participate.

In this case, local non-formal education training courses could be contemplated to remove the above mentioned barriers. After attending a local training course, the young person might feel more confident to get out of their comfort zone and travel to another country to participate in a European training course in English. Local activities could then act as a transition to the European ones.

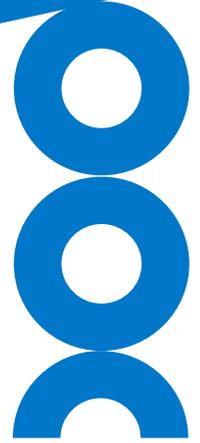
Each individual lives a unique context and it is difficult to apply solutions that serve everyone. That is why individualised solutions have a very positive impact.

The promotion of mentoring programmes through which young people could receive direct support from a local contact person could be very beneficial, especially in situations of risk, vulnerability or even lack of confidence to participate (Williams 2011).

It is important to note that with these suggestions this paper does not aim to propose a replacement of European projects, but rather to complement them or to include within them a bigger local dimension. The fact of increasing local support could very much benefit not only young people and youth work in general but also the sustainability and continuity of European projects, especially the Solidarity Projects.

Those European projects/activities which achieve an impact on the participants and raise awareness





ess of the importance of solidarity, often have difficulties in maintaining that impact. With time, participants might lose momentum, not being able to follow the path that they initiated during the project/activity because of a lack of support and guidance.

It is crucial that when coming back home, participants find a way to continue what they started and for that, a local mentor can be useful. This enhanced local support can in turn support EU project participants to continue their path once the project is over and therefore ensure the sustainability of the outcomes. It can also help to encourage those who may have difficulties to get involved in projects at the European level, supporting them on their first steps.

In this way, more young people could be reached and involved in active citizenship from the local level. By participating in local non-formal education and solidarity initiatives, they would enhance their competences and be enabled to embrace European values, including solidarity. Finally, they would be encouraged to bring the acquired competences and values into action, contributing to the positive development of their communities.

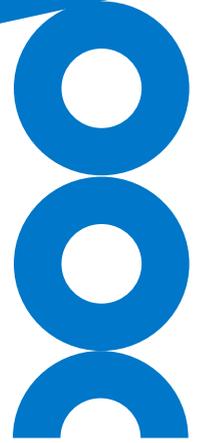
### 3.2. Employment and traineeships

Although many factors are influencing the availability of employment for young people and the context differs from country to country, it is possible to provide young people with support and preparation. In fact, this is already happening: civil society, together with various institutions and the EU itself, are trying to implement different projects and programmes with this goal, such as European Solidarity Corps, Jobs and Traineeships (European Union 2020). There is also the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs programme (2020). These programmes intend to support young people in their professional development, helping them to gain experience and skills while offering paid opportunities, which support the young people in overcoming financial obstacles.

As it has been shown, unemployment is one of the challenges that many young people face. They require better employment conditions (especially in some concrete geographical areas of Europe) and they might need guidance to make the first steps towards getting a job.

European Solidarity Corps, Jobs and Traineeships, can be part of the solution. Firstly, the programme can provide quality-checked opportunities that guarantee good job descriptions so that the young people can feel secure about their working conditions. Secondly, it can also guide young people who are wishing to take their first steps into the labour market, by supporting them in the process of get-





ting a job and giving them some helpful guidelines on how to prepare for a job interview.

Thirdly, the programme can contribute to promoting solidarity through the offered opportunities. As I have explored already in this paper, young people often do not participate in volunteering and solidarity activities once they get into the labour market because of a lack of time. A solution for that could be that they learn how to include the solidaire dimension in their work. It would be even better if their jobs already have a solidaire aspect.

A way to achieve this is by focusing on promoting those employment opportunities which are directly related to social and solidarity economy networks, social business, gift economy networks, etc. In this way, young people would be enabled to learn from their jobs and acquire, not only valuable working skills and experience, but also meaningful values that could encourage them to get civically engaged and further promote solidarity within their environments.

Another possibility is that the opportunities offered by the Jobs and Traineeships programme provide young people with some time that they need to dedicate to solidarity activities inside their working hours. For example, a young person working as a cook could dedicate a few hours to prepare food for vulnerable groups. By doing so, the solidarity dimension would be integrated into the job/traineeship so that even if the young person does not

have the chance to engage in volunteering activities, they could still conduct solidarity actions.

Those offering jobs or traineeships through the programme should guarantee that they are a solidarity related business by providing proof of it. It is crucial to attract the attention of businesses and stakeholders who can offer opportunities to young people to widen their chances of participating in the programme.

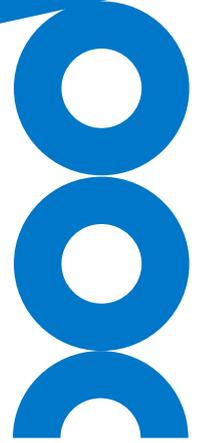
Therefore, the programme can have the capacity to offer young people a solution to their financial obstacles and engage them in solidarity actions. Yet, it is essential to have effective quality controls to guarantee that the job and traineeship opportunities (as well as European projects/initiatives in general) have sufficient positive impact and are committed to the purpose of promoting solidarity actions.

### 3.3. Connection

Solidarity also implies to support each other. To do so, it is crucial to enhance the connection between citizens, solidarity actions and different projects and initiatives. This should be done no matter if they develop in the field of youth work, in European programmes, external initiatives or others.

There is already an existing project database that can be consulted (European Union 2020). Yet, it could be interesting if, for example, upon the approval of a project proposal, the corresponding





institution (EU, National Agency, etc.) provided a list of all those projects or initiatives that have been carried on similar topics. This should include the contact details of the partners/stakeholders involved. This would facilitate the creation of synergies and increase the impact of the projects by expanding and strengthening the networks that promote solidarity in a definite sphere.

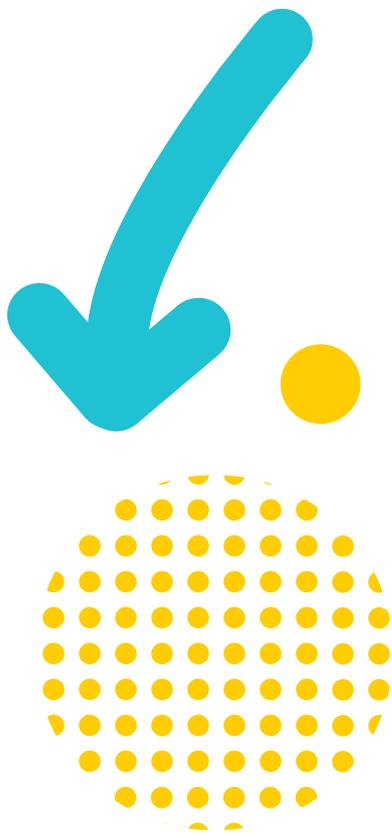
## Conclusion

Solidarity is a present value in our society that can be fostered to improve the quality of life of all citizens and especially young people. Through this paper I have analysed the current situation of young people in Europe and brought in some ideas on how to boost solidarity through the European Solidarity Corps.

Shortly, I can conclude that education is improving but it would be beneficial for young people to further participate in non-formal and informal education opportunities. Youth work is already committed to this mission and offers non-formal education opportunities while promoting solidarity and other EU values.

Still, in order to reach a wider societal impact it is important, paradoxically, to nail down the concrete needs of each community and each individual. Providing broader local action through EU programmes and initiatives could enhance the participation of young people in the democratic life and especially, it could help reaching vulnerable groups who suffer greater social exclusion.

Improvements in education are supporting a decrease in youth unemployment but young people are still in need of access to more and better-quality jobs. Although education is enhancing youth participation and fostering values such as empathy, solidarity and inclusion, we also disco-

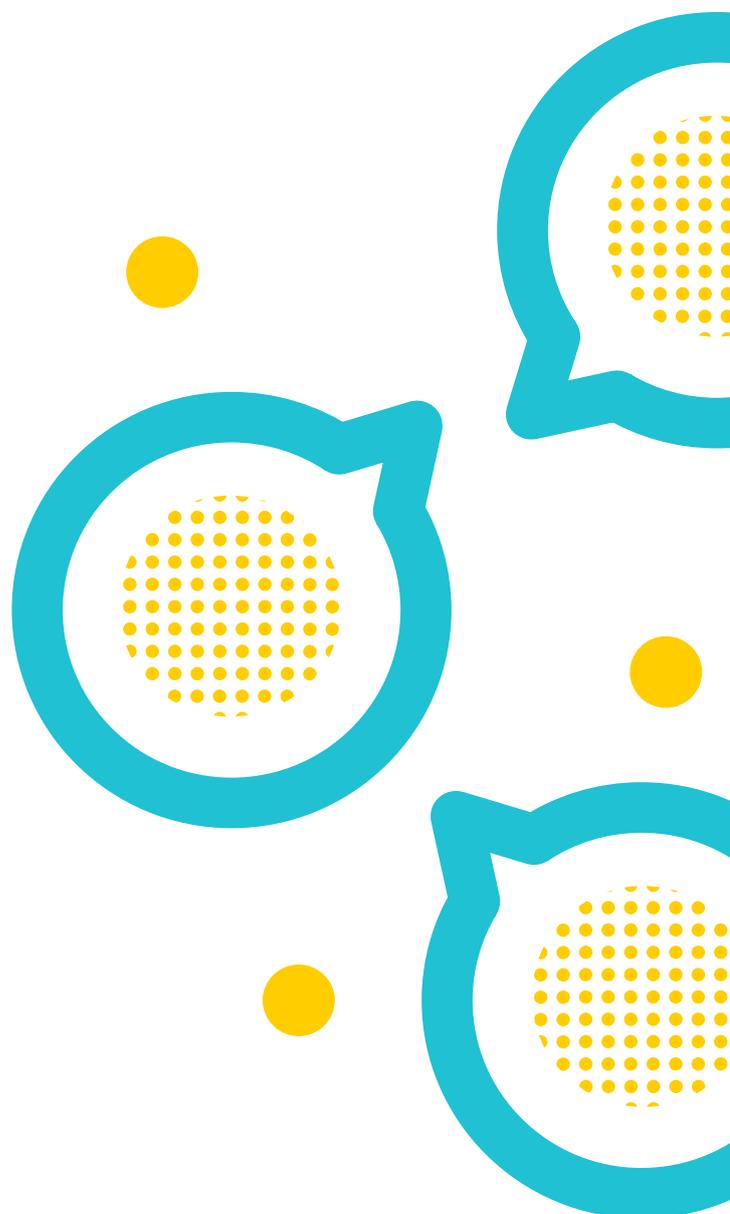


vered that when young people enter the labour market, they encounter more difficulties to keep on being active citizens, mainly because of lack of time.

Some European programmes such as the European Solidarity Corps' Jobs and Traineeships, or the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs programme, have great potential to support young people in gaining quality job experiences and promoting solidarity and active citizenship all at once.

To conclude, this paper has explored some of the possibilities that youth work and the European programmes can offer. Still, all the suggested ideas are humble propositions coming from the author's own analysis and reflection. There are certainly many other opportunities that are yet to be brought to the solidarity debate and the ones presented should be examined in more detail.

The challenge therefore is for the reader to think about what other proposals can promote and use solidarity to improve the quality of life of young people? This paper ends with inviting the reader to explore these hidden possibilities so that we, citizens, can further contribute to creating a better society in which solidarity is not only an abstract value, but one that we perform through our daily actions.





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[1] In terms of education, 83,5% of young people aged 20-24 attained upper secondary education and 40,3% of those aged 30-34 attained tertiary education. The average percentage of education leavers in the EU is 10,2%.

[2] The rate of underachievement in literacy, numeracy and science is not improving. Since 2009, the proportion of students aged 15 with low levels of proficiency in those key competences has either stagnated – as in the case of reading and mathematics – or increased – as in science.

[3] Youth unemployment was at a rate of 11,9% in 2019 which is now increasing due to the COVID-19 situation. Still, there are big differences between European countries. While southern countries such as North Macedonia (30,5%), Greece (28,9%) or Spain (24,7%) have very high youth unemployment rates, other countries such as The Netherlands 5,4%, Germany 4,9% or Czechia 3,7% have much lower ones.

[4] Poverty and social exclusion still affect large sections of the youth population. Despite a slight decline since 2014, the rate of children and young persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion is still considerable and higher than that recorded at the beginning of the decade. Vulnerable groups of young people might be particularly prone to more serious problems in their physical and mental health. In 2018, 26,2% of the people aged 16-29 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

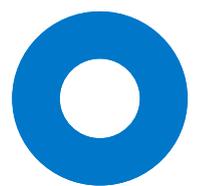
[5] These percentages did not vary much since 2011 (35,5% and 19,9% respectively).

[6] It is estimated that one year of unemployment during youth can reduce annual earnings at the age of 42 by up to 21% and that an extra three months of unemployment prior to the age of 23 results in an extra two months of unemployment, on average, between the ages of 28 and 33.

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## EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

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