



SALTO/NA Staff Meeting on Cooperation with Neighbouring Partner Countries

Sarajevo, 8th - 9th September 2022

REPORT



BEYOND BORDERS Neighbours together



1. Context and Objectives of the Meeting

The last NA/SALTO staff meeting with a focus on cooperation with neighbouring partner countries (NPC) took place in 2019. At that time, a set of recommendations aiming to support and strengthen the cooperation with partner countries was drafted, which was adopted by the Business Meeting in Helsinki the same year. Important developments have taken place since then, but in essence, these recommendations are still relevant today (link see Background reading, p.10).

Generally speaking and based on gathered evidence and observations, the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries (now called third countries not associated to the Programmes, regions 1 – 4) has become more challenging rather than easier in the past years. The Strategic Partnership Beyond Borders that was created in 2021 in order to address at least some of the existing challenges by NAs and regional SALTOs has given an impetus to bringing this dimension of the Programmes back on the agenda of National Agencies and to step up much-needed support¹.

This National Agency/ SALTO staff meeting was organised within Beyond Borders by SALTO SEE from 8th – 9th September 2022 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and gathered 16 colleagues of NAs and SALTOs. Current developments that have had a strong impact on this cooperation and that this meeting aimed to tackle included the effects of the Covid-pandemic, the war in Ukraine as well as the new system of calculation of the 25% budget limit in KA1, Erasmus+, for partner countries that was foreseen by the European Commission as of 2023.

The intention of the meeting was to offer a space to exchange about questions at a very practical as well as a more content-related level, to share information and to develop suggestions on how NAs could better support the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries as one important dimension of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps in the field of youth.

The specific objectives were:

- to develop more connections and communication among the colleagues dealing with this cooperation (especially knowing that there are no contact persons as such in NAs for cooperation with partner countries);
- to exchange perspectives and raise awareness on the questions, if and why the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries is relevant, what is the added value, and what needs to be improved;

¹ The **Beyond Borders** SNAC was created in 2021. It is coordinated by SALTO SEE together with SALTO EECA and SALTO EUROMED and the National Agencies of the Czech Republic, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia. The overall objectives of the partnership are to:

- Further develop the cooperation in the youth field between Programme and Partner countries within Erasmus+ and the ESC, in particular to
 - enhance opportunities for sustainable partnerships and joint projects;
 - develop regular and targeted support for projects and partnerships;
 - strengthen the impact of the projects involving partners from neighbouring regions and
 - increase support for the development and recognition of youth work in the Partner regions;
- Further explore the links between the Programmes, relevant policies and strategies;
- Increase the visibility and recognition of the relevance and added value of this dimension of the Programmes among different stakeholders.

- to share information about and clarify the existing framework, state of play and practices in NAs and SALTOs within both Programmes regarding this cooperation and
- to address and (where possible) resolve existing questions and concerns, and to identify which steps we can take (in each NA/SALTO and together) to better support this cooperation.

2. Current Situation of Cooperation with Neighbouring Partner Countries

2.1. State of play and realities shared by National Agencies

The participants were asked to share some information related to the overall state of play of the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries in their NAs prior to the meeting in writing and then exchanged further during the activity. The information that was gathered from participants prior to the meeting and partially sent afterwards is available in a separate Excel document. Here are the main findings:

Question 1: Number of projects with NPC supported by NAs (in Erasmus+ and ESC)

NAs mostly, but not always, used the available 25% of their budget in KA1 for projects with partner countries. There is no limit for projects with NPC within ESC, however the percentage of projects with NPC granted seems to be lower here. No specific reasons for this were indicated.

Question 2: Kinds of projects supported

Often, the cooperation with NPC supported by NAs focuses on a particular region, depending on historical-political-cultural links. Projects are often based on longer-term established partnerships and only partially involve new partners/ organisations. Priority topics differ from country to country or were not indicated.

Question 3: Satisfaction with project quality and quantity

Many NAs indicated that they are not satisfied with the quality of the projects or applications or have noticed a recent decrease in quality. A particular problem mentioned is repetition or copy-pasting of applications, which are sometimes hard to detect, also due to lack of monitoring in E+, and these applications cannot always be rejected. Other issues mentioned were lack of involvement of new partners and topics that do not seem to focus on the needs of the partner or target group. On the other hand, some NAs also report satisfaction with high quality projects and partnerships focusing on relevant themes.

Question 4: Observed trends

The observed trends differ between NAs. They include, a. o., an increase in projects/applications with NPC in both Programmes, youth workers coming from NPC and living/studying in a EU country registering an organisation in order to apply for projects there, and experienced organisations from NPC approaching less experienced organisations in a Programme country with the request to submit a prepared application. It was mentioned that the lack of specific selection criteria for cooperation with NPC in the Programmes makes it more difficult to select projects according to needs and relevance for this specific context (especially in partner countries).

Question 5: TCA and NET support activities with NPC

The TCA/NET activities organised by NAs are generally, but not always open for NPC (in some cases, the practice changed during Covid due to specific/ more limited EU entry-requirements during this period). As reasons for opening activities to NPC, including more diverse perspectives and offering support for trainers and youth workers from NPC were mentioned. NET support activities were mentioned to be generally less open for NPC participants. Only few NAs have organised support activities with a specific focus on supporting cooperation with partner countries.

Question 6: Issues and needs to be addressed

Needs that should be addressed include:

- a) especially in view of the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the organisation of more projects focusing on reconciliation and peace building and considering different perspectives and understanding of key concepts, such as European citizenship or solidarity, and exchange of practices to develop youth work;
- b) supporting more cooperation especially in ESC, where procedures are more complicated, even more so for hosting projects in partner countries; especially in the field of volunteering activities, Covid represented a disruption, there is less knowledge about volunteers in the regions now and the numbers of volunteers have decreased.
- c) creating better access to data about ongoing projects and more information about projects/ realities in Partner countries in order to be able to verify information that is provided in the project application/ reports (on-spot checks);
- d) trust-building activities in order to make sure that the selected (partner) organisations in Partner countries are trustworthy.

2.2. Practices of monitoring in neighbouring regions

SALTO SEE

A system of monitoring of organisations exists in ESC only. Information is gathered through the TEC cycle and the Annual Event for volunteers as well as through annual meetings and exchange with organisations that are hosting or sending volunteers. Some monitoring visits to organisations are carried out every year by Quality Label experts (one from the country of the organisation and one from another country). 7 monitoring visits are carried out in 2022.

Buddy support system: one experienced organisation, usually from a Programme country, is supporting a newcomer organisation that has a Quality Label from a Partner country in the WB region.

SALTO EECA

Monitoring also exists in ESC only. Information is gathered during the TEC trainings and visits are carried out by Quality Label experts according to urgency.

Coaching system: Quality Label experts support new organisations.

Sometimes, NAs decided to visit an organisation and a person from SALTO joined.

Resources (budget, human resources) are limited.

SALTO EUROMED

Also in ESC only. Information is gathered during trainings. One training per country per year used to be organised for organisations with and without Quality Label. There is one day, where all are gathered together.

There have not been monitoring visits recently, but the aim is to develop such a system, possibly starting in three countries. SALTO EuroMed would like to involve NAs. Local trainers could visit organisations, too.

Another aim is to rebuild the network of contact points/ info centres in the SouthMed countries.

Almost no information about Erasmus+ projects is available.

In the discussion, the need for information and possible monitoring of KA1 projects hosted in the neighbouring partner countries was highlighted. Regional SALTOs would have the capacities to carry out monitoring/ check-up visits, but might need additional human/financial resources to do so (depending on the requested quantity).

2.3. Proposed new calculation of 25% limit for projects with NPC in Erasmus+ KA1

This issue was resolved during the time of the meeting, so that there was no need to discuss it further at that moment.

Prior to the publication of the draft Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2023, a new way of calculating the 25% limit for projects with NPC in KA1 had been proposed by the European Commission (based on the outcomes of a survey circulated previously among NAs). The proposal envisaged the calculation of these 25% on a project- rather than annual basis, based on the budget used by the partners in NPC in each project.

Before the NA staff meeting, the Beyond Borders partnership with the support of the Co-Group had sent a letter to the European Commission expressing concerns about the proposed new approach, including letters from three organisations involved in long-term cooperation involving Partner and Programme countries, who expressed concerns that they might not be able to continue the partnerships and cooperation that they had developed over a longer period of time, should the new approach come into place.

The response from the European Commission reached the participants shortly before the end of the meeting and was positively received. It announced that the old system of calculation would stay in place for 2023 as well as some prospects for flexibility of the 25% limit in exceptional cases.

3. Insights from the Field

In order to enable participants to gain a clearer perspective of what might be needed to better support organisations that are engaged in cooperation involving Programme and neighbouring countries, three youth workers had been invited to join the meeting online for one session, where they shared their story of cooperation according to a pre-defined approach called Collective Story Harvesting.

The stories were told by Anna Yeghoyan from Youth Initiative Centre in Gyumri, Armenia; Sara Bertolino, organisation Giosef Torino in Italy; and Marine Corre who works for the organisation U Pokretu in Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The stories focused on the organisations' cooperation within Erasmus+ and the ESC and how it had unfolded for the organisations, having in mind that the stories were not finished. To ensure that different perspectives and experiences were covered, the three stories were chosen according to the specific criteria: stories connected with each Partner region, experienced and inexperienced beneficiary, beneficiary from partner country and Programme country, experience with E+ and ESC.

Participants were split up into three groups. In each group, participants listened to one story, and the impressions from each group were subsequently shared in plenary.

The guiding questions for listening to the stories were:

- **Connections** (between partners, with young people, with NAs and SALTOs) – which connections were made or missing?
- **Transformations and impact:** What has shifted and transformed as story unfolds? What impact has this had?
- **Challenges, needs:** What are challenges met on the road? What needs are calling to be addressed?
- **Support:** What are some of the conditions that were crucial for experiences to happen? What is supporting the processes? What support is missing?

Observations/ impressions from the stories

Connections

- Better understanding of how the organisations in the regions work. That helps us to understand the reality.
- International projects can contribute to the development of local youth work: transfer of good practice, international development of organisations.
- Shared interest in the topic of the activities brings the “right” people together; that brings better partnerships.

Challenges, needs

- To find common ground to achieve the same goals, not to do projects for the sake of doing them, but to drive more youth into the idea of volunteering.
- Compromising. Equal share of involvement. Not one boss, but everyone should be motivated to bring their part.
- Preparing the ground, mostly for ESC, to avoid culture shock. Most organisations should be aware of difficulties, backgrounds, cultures of volunteers, youth exchanges.

Transformations and impact

- How to identify potential for growth?
- Take risks, allow failures.
- Impact needs time, goes beyond the scope of an individual project.

Support

- Knowledge of the partner and country context is important.
- Organisations in partner countries are “never in charge”.
- The need for balance in the partnership is important as the partners from Partner countries are financially dependent.
- A good partner is crucial to start European activities.

Additional comments

- Impressive: belief, commitment of everybody involved.
- The storyteller has the power to make an impact, to influence NA, SALTO officers
- Great to see what the insights were for all people involved.
- It’s good to have a structure when there is a lot to say.

Insights and topics emerging after the storytelling

- Expertise at NAs is needed, insights about Partner countries and youth work there
- Organisations from Partner countries cannot apply and this has consequences at different levels: ownership of the projects is lower in Partner countries, the imbalance in power is also related to broader questions of dignity, equality and creating dependencies.
- Trust in partners is important. It is also important to recognize potential and to let room for growth!
- Would it be possible to have accreditations in Partner countries?
- How can we help to support beneficiaries to make it a bit easier for them to cooperate with Partner countries?
- KA2 partners – promotion of the added value is needed.
- Priorities have different connotations in different countries. How to take that into consideration?
- How can NAs know the organisations more, e.g. if they really have an inclusion aspect?
- There are three “bubbles” of organisations: Involved organisations in Partner countries, organisations in Partner countries that do not know or use the Programmes, organisations in Programme countries. How could they be connected?
- Visibility in ESC volunteering, what are the possibilities?
- Synergies between Erasmus+ and ESC

4. How can my NA / SALTO and we together better support cooperation with partner countries? Exploring Topics

a) How could diverse organisations be connected? Three bubbles of organisations: Involved organisations in Partner countries, organisations in Partner countries that do not know or use the Programmes, organisations in Programme countries.

Group: Nataša, Maite, Tomek, Helena, Paulina, Paavo

Potential organisations and how to identify them?

- Identity of organisations and youth workers who are into cooperation between Programme and Partner countries: “ambassadors”, “agents of change”
- Next steps:

- Building connections between newcomers in Partner countries (informed, but finding first steps difficult) and accredited organisations – international activity to support that.
- Support national activities to encourage organisations.

b) Visibility in ESC volunteering, what are the possibilities. Decrease of volunteers.

Group: Theo, Andrej

- There is a lack of communication towards different actors, because it's hard. Everyone should know about volunteering, but they don't.
- What can be done through different channels?
- We realised there are a lot of barriers in the Programme.

c) Quality – how to monitor activities and organisations?

Group: Jeremy, Betty, Emilija, Emma, Mauro, Luca, Sonja

- Monitoring of youth exchanges in Partner countries is an issue. We need to find out what the needs are.
- Monitoring in KA1 needs to be addressed more broadly.
- Communication issue, gap to bridge
- Need to strengthen the information flow between SALTOs and NAs: expertise, offer.
- Next step: How to strengthen the information flow? We can pilot monitoring in KA1, if there is a need for it, to see what it brings.

d) What kind of projects, activities could we do, in TCA, NET, SNACs...?

Group: Maite, Theo, Betty, Paulina, Sonja

- Two support activities are envisaged for 2023: With accredited organisations (also in relation to point a) above) and the Czech NA will host a PBA for ESC.
- Maybe find a better use of what already exists.
- We should think more in terms of processes than activities.
- SALTOs – should bring back what is possible with neighbouring partner countries to raise knowledge of NA colleagues.
- Communicate better on TCA level what is possible.
- Plan for 2023: how to better support cooperation with partner countries?

e) War in Ukraine: What are the effects of it on E+ and ESC?

Group: Emilija, Tomek

- Website with all the official notes, to know who can be included: www.salto-youth.net/helpukraine
- Meeting with Ukrainian sending organisations and organisations in Programme countries can be organized if the need is expressed.

f) Refreshing the support to organisations in the regions + How can we support stable, fair, reliable partnerships?

Group: all

- E+: Promote accreditation to networks with NPCs as a basis for common projects.
- Promote Buddy Support System in ESC between organisations in Programme countries and NPCs. Maybe there could be a similar line of support for E+?

- How to deal with the situation of inequality, and that organisations in Partner countries cannot apply for projects? How can we accredit organisations in partner countries (long-term vision 😊)?
- We need a change in thinking.

5. Next Steps

a) **Speak to my NA**

Participants agreed to share reflections from this meeting with colleagues in their NA and to see how they could better support cooperation with organisations from neighbouring partner countries, according to their specific situation.

b) **Project assessment**

Do we need a separate evaluation grid for projects with Partner countries? Or could some criteria be looked at differently?

I would be interesting to explore possibilities within NAs, where possible.

c) **Event for accredited organisations (KA1) from Programme countries and potential new organisations from Partner regions to form partnerships and design cooperation.**

- Interested countries: SI, HR, FI; AT, BEFL, IT, NO, FR (PL, LT), all three regional SALTOS
- SI, HR, FI will investigate the likelihood of hosting the activity in their country
- Colleagues will check with their NA what is the interest
- TCA2023, (possibly implemented in 2024)
- Planning group decides the design
- Participants of the staff meeting will be informed

d) **PBA hosted by Czech NA**

- Cooperation with partner countries, cooperation with region SALTOS and some NA
- WP 2023; planning board, indicate potential NA partners for prep team
- Under Beyond Borders SNAC - see how to frame it as an activity that will be followed up by other activities.
- Target group will be defined, but most likely the focus will be on organisations who already obtained the QL.

Both activities should be organised in the frame of Beyond Borders.

e) **Beyond Borders further plans to support the cooperation with Neighbouring Partner countries at different levels in 2023.**

1. Research. To complete the perspectives and needs collected in the neighbouring regions in 2021, data on the perspectives of organisations based in Programme countries regarding the cooperation with NPC will be collected and analysed (motivation, needs, challenges, specificities, benefits, added value, impact...).
2. Mainstreaming. The partners involved in BB agreed to try to mainstream cooperation with NPC in all existing frameworks and processes (SNACs, staff meetings etc.), wherever possible.
3. Advocacy. Beyond Borders will further advocate for conditions for cooperation with NPC offered by the Programmes which enable (more) equal access and possibilities of participation.

In terms of advocacy, it was suggested to open other Programme Actions applying the 25% limit for neighbouring partner countries.

f) Next NA staff meetings

Regular platforms for exchange among NA/SALTO colleagues on topics of relevance for cooperation with Partner countries should be created, both online and residentially.

Online informal exchange among NAs could be offered after application deadlines to talk about hot topics in ESC and/or KA1 projects with NPC (a format that exists already for exchange on e.g. solidarity projects and participation projects).

The next residential NA staff meeting is planned to be hosted by SALTO EECA in the EECA region in late 2023 or first half of 2024.

6. Background Reading

Recommendations to better support the cooperation with partner countries of the last NA/SALTO consultative meeting (adopted by the Business Meeting) 2019:

<https://www.salto-youth.net/about/regionalcooperation/current/consultative-meeting/>

Figures and trends of cooperation with partner regions in the period 2014 – 2020:

<https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/eeca/cooperation/statistics/>

<https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/erasmus-study/>

<https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/npcstatistics2014-2017/>



Annex 1: Programme Overview

Thursday, 8th September	Friday, 9th September
<p>9.00</p> <p>WHY ARE WE HERE and CONNECTING WITH EACH OTHER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Framework and purpose of the meeting & desired outcomes - Getting to know each other and starting connections 	<p>9.00</p> <p>EXPLORING TOPICS: How can my NA / SALTO and we together better support cooperation with partner countries?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topics that emerged previous day • Up to 25% co-financing • Projects addressing the invasion of Russia in Ukraine • Other topics? <p>Working in parallel on identified topics (according to interest).</p> <p>The aim is to explore the topic and find out what is needed – recommendations, personal next steps, development of process, etc.</p>
10.30 Break	
<p>11.00</p> <p>WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THE COOPERATION WITH PARTNER COUNTRIES</p> <p>Picture of collected information on the situation in NAs/SALTOS</p> <p>Sharing in smaller groups (information, questions, needs, concerns...)</p> <p>Clarifying the existing framework, conditions and practices regarding cooperation with partner countries (role of SALTOS, monitoring, etc.)</p>	<p>11.00</p> <p>EXPLORING TOPICS</p> <p>Continuation</p>
13.00 Lunch	
<p>14.30</p> <p>CONNECTING WITH THE FIELD</p> <p>Collective story harvesting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearing 3 stories from the field = experiences of different organisations • Each person listens to one story in depth and we share the harvest later 	<p>15.00</p> <p>CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, NEXT STEPS, ETC.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing next steps, action plans, etc. - according to what is meaningful for each topic
15.55 Break	16.15 Break
<p>16.10 – 17.30</p> <p>SENSING WHAT IS NEEDED TO FURTHER SUPPORT COOPERATION WITH PARTNER COUNTRIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meta-harvest: sharing what we heard in the stories from the field and reporting to plenary • Insights that are emerging, topics arising to take them to the conversations next day 	<p>16.35 – 18.00</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting the conclusions, next steps, etc. • Clarifying roles and tasks for next steps (NAs, SALTOS, SNAC Beyond Borders...) and conclusions • Evaluation of the meeting
Evening: Discovering Sarajevo and dinner in town	Dinner at the hotel

Annex 2: Participants

Name	National Agency, SALTO
Helena Brisevac	Croatian NA
Betty Cutolo	Norwegian NA
Mauro Desira	NA Belgium-FL (JINT)
Maïté Gerschwitz	NA France/Salto Euromed
Theodor L. Háva	Czech National Agency for International Education and Research
Guido Kaesbach	German NA - Jugend für Europa
Paulina Kocot	Polish NA
Emma Mavric	NA Austria
Luca Pignocco	Italian NA
Paavo Pyykkönen	Finish NA
Sonja Mitter Skulj	Slovenian NA / SALTO SEE
Tomasz Szopa	Polish NA / SALTO EECA
Jeremy Tremolieres	French NA
Andrej Troha	Slovenian NA / SALTO SEE
Emilia Urbonaite	Lithuanian NA
Natasa Zebovec	Slovenian NA (MOVIT)
Alenka Oblak	facilitator